# The New Criterion

October 1990

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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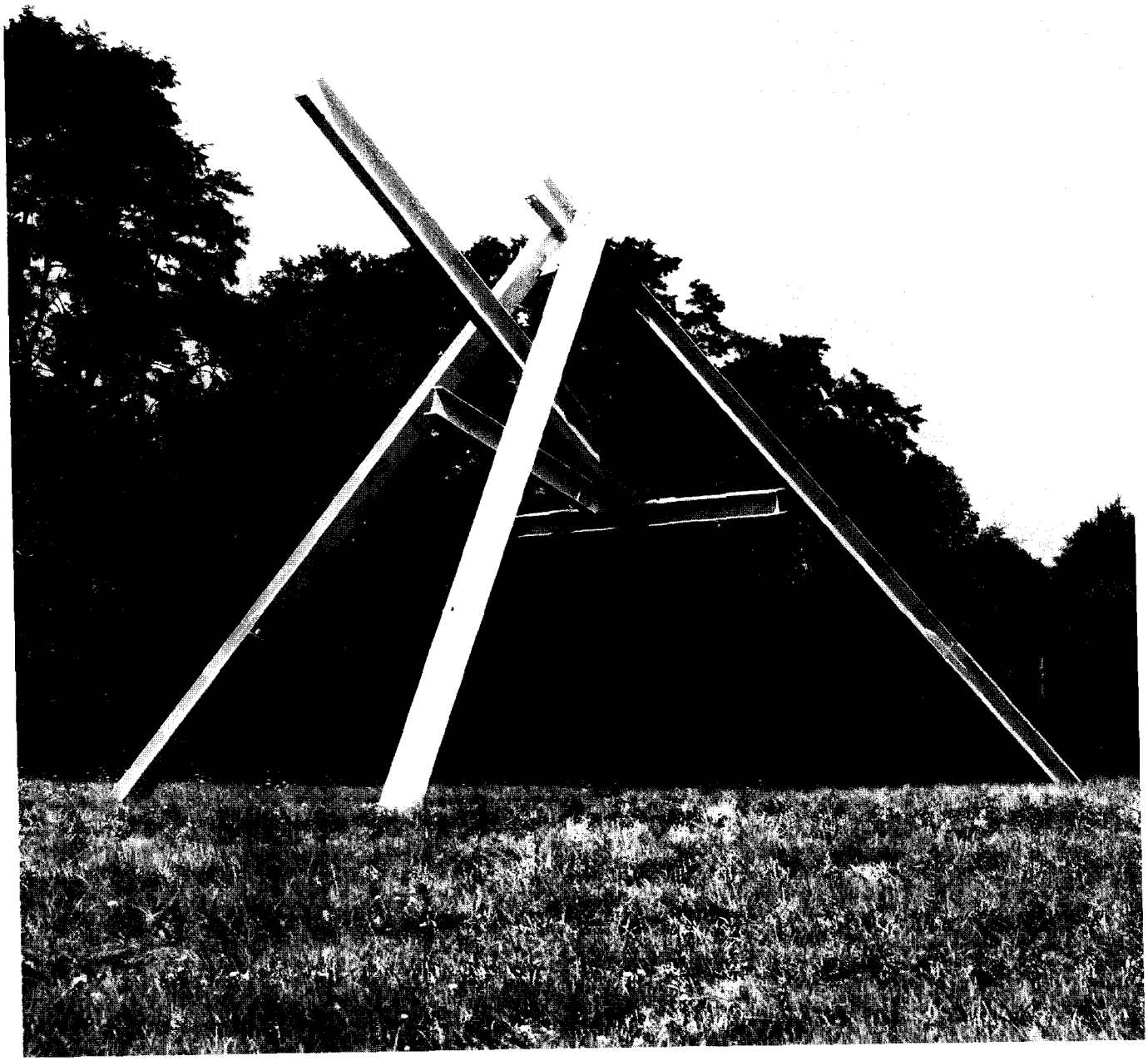

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# Notes & Comments: October 1990

## *The new liberal orthodoxy*

For more than a year now, ever since the Mapplethorpe and Serrano affairs plunged the National Endowment for the Arts into the swamp of controversy from which it still shows no signs of retrieving itself, a great many liberal voices have been busily decrying an alleged threat to freedom of creative expression in this country. If we were to take literally what is being said by these liberal voices in the arts, in the media, and in various branches of public life—not to mention the professional arts-lobbying organizations that make a specialty of fear-mongering as a basic fund-raising technique—we would have to believe that something approximating a reign of terror was now imminent—if not already underway—in American cultural life. Yet the odd thing about this alleged reign of terror is that the voices so loudly announcing it encounter absolutely no obstacles to their vociferous and protracted propaganda campaign. On the contrary, they quite dominate all discussion of this issue in the media and in public forums the country over—a curious way indeed for a threat to freedom of expression to manifest itself.

The truth is, of course, that the liberals and radicals who are in the vanguard of this campaign know very well that artists and writers in the United States who nowadays wish to speak out on so-called "cutting-edge" issues —which means, for the most part, writers and artists who conform to the current radical agenda on gender, lifestyle, and race—enjoy a greater degree of freedom of expression than ever before in our (or anyone else's) history. They also enjoy far more power in shaping the cultural and intellectual life of our society than ever before. What these liberal voices are talking about is something else—the right to control tax dollars for the purpose of supporting and expanding the legitimacy of their radical agenda.

Meanwhile, there *is* a very real threat to freedom of expression in cultural life today, a threat unmentioned by these liberal voices. And it goes unmentioned for the very good reason that these liberals are themselves the agents of coercion striving to deny us the right to oppose or even to characterize or question the new liberal orthodoxy that has come to govern all matters having to do with gender, race, ethnicity, sexual behavior, and moral values. What began as a program of affirmative action designed to win for "minorities" of various kinds access to employment and other opportunities traditionally denied them has now degenerated, as many predicted it would, into a campaign of censure and censorship that attempts to prohibit serious criticism of anything produced by a member of a requisite "minority" group in the name of art or culture.



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There is now only one group in American society that liberal opinion has given us dispensation to attack freely, only one group that it is O.K. to stigmatize for the villainous, "hegemonic" role it has played in the social, sexual, cultural, and political life of our civilization—and that group, it almost goes without saying, consists of white male heterosexuals. It's also become O.K. in some liberal circles to attribute a kind of malevolent racial prejudice to a subdivision of this group—namely, white male heterosexuals who are Jews—so long as those making such charges belong to a "minority" that has been granted a special dispensation by liberal opinion to hurl outrageous and unfounded accusations as a "minority" right.

That this coercive and malignant attempt to silence criticism in the name of racial, sexual, and ethnic equality should have become a major component of the liberal agenda for the 1990s is an historic tragedy for American society, and it is already turning large areas of American culture and American education into a wasteland of ghastly pieties and even ghastlier opportunisms. The English writer Paul Johnson sounded a little extreme when he characterized this development only a few months ago as "the rise of liberal fascism." But from the way this movement has lately accelerated, becoming bolder in its claims and staking out greater and greater spheres of influence, we can no longer be sure that Mr. Johnson was exaggerating. What we can now be certain of, in any case, is that the real threat to freedom of expression now looming in American cultural life is this liberal threat: It has already derailed the debate over the National Endow ment for the Arts and is making ever more extraordinary inroads into the governance of our mainstream institutions.

## *Rediscovering the New World*

Is it possible that the upcoming quincentennial of Columbus's discovery of the New World will turn out to be one of the great non-events of the 1990s? The evidence so far suggests that what ought to be a joyous celebration will be destroyed by radical ethnic agendas and liberal self-hatred.

The opportunities lost for awakening pride in ourselves and our achievements, and for enlarging knowledge of our own history and that of the rest of the Americas, are immense. The New World, after all, is not merely a metaphor; it remains today what it has been for five hundred years: the major shaping force in contemporary life.

It is possible—and indeed necessary—to be more particular about what might be done by way of a Columbus celebration. In this regard, we should consider paying proper tribute to the rich twentieth-century classical music tradition that exists all the way from North America to the farthest reaches of South America.

Our own national tradition—in particular our great symphonic and chamber music, most of it dating from the 1920s through the 1950s—is at least partially known and respected. Unfortunately, such is not the case anywhere with the marvelous music of our Southern neighbors. Merely to mention Carlos Chávez (1899-1975) in Mexico and Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) in Brazil is to name two of the greatest masters of music, albeit sorely ignored, of music in this century. One immediately thinks too of Silvestre Revueltas (1896-1940) and Blas Galindo (b. 1910) in Mexico, along with Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983) in Argentina, as not just deserving national reputations but repeated performances everywhere.

The plight of the music of Villa-Lobos is particularly interesting, and particularly disturbing. The composer of many hundreds of pieces—the figure of one thousand has been mentioned—he is not even given the justice of a complete listing of his works in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.* His innumerable large-scale works of quality and substance, brilliantly combining in equal



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measure Brazilian folk music, veneration of Bach, and 1920s modernism, are unavailable on LP, and are difficult to obtain in printed form. Altogether, Villa-Lobos is now known to the music-loving public (if at all) only for his *Bachiana Brasileira* no. 5 (1938-41), a marvelous and haunting wordless aria for soprano and cello ensemble. Unknown are his wonderful string quartets, his piano music (some of the best written for that instrument in this century), and such large-scale works as the lush, folk-inspired *Uirapurú* (1917), and *Erosão* (1950), a stark setting of a Brazilian myth of the origin of the Amazon River.

What a marvelous opportunity for paying tribute to Columbus's voyages the music of Villa-Lobos—and that of his Latin American colleagues—would provide. Here, in music, is a true voyage of discovery, for both musicians and for audiences. There can be little doubt, either, that this music would be a discovery not just for North American audiences but for audiences in the entire Western hemisphere.

It is easy to understand why all this music cannot form a part of the Columbus quincentennial celebration; once again, politics has taken command. As is the case in every other sphere of public life, the radical imperatives of feminism, ethnicity, and multiculturalism have crowded out the best that our civilization has to offer. But a further question must be asked: why hasn't all this beautiful music exercised a more serious challenge to the American musical establishment? The answer, alas, is simple. It cannot be stated too strongly that the cause of Villa-Lobos's plight, like that of today's music itself, is the chronic failure of musicians and administrators alike to choose any musical course that does not provide instant career gratification and audience success. Those who are responsible for the present mania for performing all of the works of Mozart in 1991, the two hundredth anniversary of that hardly neglected genius, will understand the situation immediately.

## *The Heath travesty of American literature*

The latest example of what the politics of ethnic and sexual redress has done to the academy comes to us in two elephantine volumes from the D. C. Heath publishing company. Totalling nearly fifty-five hundred pages, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* is a monument to the intellectual bankruptcy of the multicultural imperatives it champions. It is a systematic attempt to subject the study of American literature and culture to the strictures of affirmative-action thinking. For the editors of *The Heath Anthology*, questions of quality and of literary excellence—when they arise at all—take a distant back seat to the diversity quotient. If there are Zunis out there, some of them must have written something—or at least said something that someone else wrote down—and by God samples of those utterances must be dug up and placed alongside the works of Hawthorne and Melville, Wharton and James as exemplary products of American literature.

It seems grimly appropriate that *The Heath Anthology* had its origins in the *annus mirabilis* of 1968, that it began coalescing at a summer institute at Yale, and that it has enjoyed the support of such prestigious institutions as the Fund for the Improvement for Post-Secondary Education, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Lilly Endowment. Paul Lauter, one of the anthology's chief editors and clearly the moving force behind the project, explains the gestation of the book in tedious detail in an introduction that simply reeks of political rectitude. Noting that the anthology's editorial board is "unique in its large size and in its diversity," he boasts that "in its initial composition the board had equal numbers of women and men, minority and white participants," that these estimable people "came from every part of the country, taught in virtually every kind of institution," and so on.



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What Professor Lauter does not presume to say—obviously these are secondary concerns—is that the editorial board of *The Heath Anthology* was the best qualified that could be assembled or that its members were literary scholars of proven accomplishment and critical judgment. Instead, he proudly announces that *The Heath Anthology* offers students "by far the widest sampling of the work of minority and white women writers available in any anthology of American literature" ("109 women of all races, 25 individual Native American authors," etc., etc.). In other words, what he has given us here is not primarily a *literary* anthology but a kind of anthropological sampler: an agglomeration of texts chosen to represent not literary excellence but an approved ethnic and sexual "mix." Consequently, while some of the headnotes for individual authors are responsible and informative (being written mostly not by the editors but other academics), in conception and execution *The Heath Anthology* is a disaster.

It is especially disastrous considered as a textbook designed to introduce students to the riches of American literature. Students will find only about seventy-five pages devoted to the work of Henry James, and a mere twenty—*twenty* pages—to the work of William Faulkner. But there is room for plenty of Zuni and Aztec poetry in English translation, a whole section of blues lyrics ("I need plenty grease in my frying pan 'cause I don't want my meat to burn," etc.), hundreds and hundreds of pages of third-rate popular literature by women, translations of the poetry Chinese immigrants scribbled on their barracks walls expressing, as the editors put it, "their outrage and humiliation at the treatment America accorded them." The issue here is not whether we should strive to preserve examples of demotic culture; of course we should; the issue is whether every scrap of writing, no matter how vulgar, deserves to be hailed and studied as literature so long as it happens to have been produced by an approved victim group. Students get less than fifty pages of Edith Wharton in *The Heath Anthology*, but Professor Lauter and company make sure they are exposed, in the section of African-American folktales, to such edifying tidbits as "The Signifying Monkey," which begins "Deep down in the jungle so they say/ There's a signifying motherfucker down the way." This is the kind of mind-opening "literature" we are being asked to make room for in the canon.

It is hardly surprising that in many respects a more appropriate title for *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* would be *The Heath Anthology of Anti-American Literature*. A disgust with "mainstream" (i.e., European-based) American culture is a standard feature of the multicultural ethos, and it is especially prominent in the editorial commentary supplied by the general editors. Writing about the World's Columbia Exposition that opened in 1893, for example, the editors tell us that "the Fair's much-vaunted whiteness was [an] apt symbol of the continued dominance in the 1890s of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture."

There are other extraordinary things in these bulky tomes. Early on in the first volume, readers are solemnly informed that Captain John Smith of Pocahontas fame "was ethnocentric in his views." No! Was he really? In a particularly large gesture, the editors even allow, regretfully, that the Indians "were, most likely, equally ethnocentric." Then, too, we discover that the Puritans (who also suffered from a bad case of ethnocentricism) "implemented their mainstream ideology . . . by establishing texts that would effect their cultural ends." The "mainstream ideology" of the Puritans? The "mainstream ideology" of that small band of dissenters who came here to escape religious persecution? Such vertiginous musings are par for the course in these volumes.

*The Heath Anthology* glaringly exemplifies one of the most corrupting aspects of the



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whole phenomenon of multiculturalism: namely, the attempt to obscure basic intellectual and aesthetic issues with a smokescreen of moralism. Like many forms of tyranny, multiculturalism pursues its goals by arrogating to itself the vocabulary of virtue. Armed with the rhetoric of "diversity" and "pluralism," tipsy with sundry social resentments, partisans of multiculturalism run riot over "mere" literary values. Shouting about "openness," they are closed to experiencing culture on its own terms. The idea that the study of literature is something *inherently* valuable, not simply another excuse for political activism, is as foreign to this way of thinking as is the notion that the criterion of literary excellence might be . . . well, literary excellence. *The Heath Anthology* is a shabby production, intellectually shallow, politically tendentious; it deserves the scorn of everyone who cares about the preservation and transmission of American literature.

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## From the archives of the academy:

"Walt Disney's is the representative mass culture of late capitalism, and the Walt Disney Duck comics, which flourished in the twenty years following World War II, are arguably the representative, most realistic, and best children's comics of the era . . . . The postwar years saw a massive expansion of U.S. economic, military, and cultural power that was more or less unquestioned at home, though increasingly resisted abroad. The foreign challenge to U.S. hegemony was met with military force, economic sanctions, and the exportation to Third World countries of the U.S. capitalist values and artifacts, even as the culture of those countries was appropriated by means anthropological, ethnographic, artistic, touristic, etc. In this two-way process of cultural absorption, the simultaneous application of economic and military pressure was designed to ensure that the cultural values of the metropolitan United States predominated. The Disney comics, indeed, incorporate that strategy more succinctly and transparently than any comparable cultural phenomenon . . . . Among the many themes that emerge from a politically aware study of the Disney comics, we find the worst values of capitalism in such domains as family relations, the money ethic, and attitudes to other races stemming from the U.S. global-expansionist policy, i.e., imperialism . . . "

From "Dispossession by Ducks: The Imperialist Treasure Hunt in Southeast Asia," by David Kunzle, in *Art Journal,* published by the College Art Association, Summer 1990, Volume 49, Number 2. Professor Kunzle, Professor of Art History at UCLA, is the author of *History of the Comic Strip* (vol. 1, 1973; vol. 2, 1990), *Fashion and Fetishism: A Social History of the Corset, Tight-Lacing, and Other Forms of Body-Sculpture in the West* (1981), and other works.



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# Irving Howe at seventy

## *by Hilton Kramer*

"Approaching threescore and ten," as he writes in the preface to his *Selected Writings 1950-1990*, Irving Howe has assembled a capacious volume of his essays to give us what he describes as "a reasonably fair picture of an intellectual career spanning four decades." [1] Worth noting, perhaps, is the absence of any claim that the "picture" offered to us in this book is to be considered complete. Those of us who began reading Mr. Howe in the late 1940s will particularly note the omission of anything from those early years of his intellectual endeavors—a period in which the acrid residue of the old factional fights of the Thirties was very much in evidence, setting the tone and defining the substance of every argument and observation. But if this *Selected Writings* does not give us a complete picture of Mr. Howe's work over the years, it nonetheless provides quite a lot—enough, certainly, for us to make a fair assessment of the extraordinary career that the book surveys.

Given the high visibility of that career, it is altogether fitting that we should have such a volume to mark the occasion of Mr. Howe's seventieth birthday—and from one of our most prestigious publishing houses, too. For this is one of the ways in which our much-maligned bourgeois society has traditionally honored its senior men of letters, and there can be no question that Mr. Howe has for many years now been a member in good standing of whatever it is that passes for a literary establishment in this country. With his many books, his countless contributions to the mainstream press as well as leading literary and political journals, and the coveted lectureships at Princeton, Harvard, and other elite institutions that have come his way for decades, all capped by his years as a Distinguished Professor at the City University of New York, Mr. Howe is indeed a pillar of what is sometimes called the intellectual community and something of a celebrity in the world at large. He once even achieved the distinction—rare among intellectuals of his generation—of being interviewed by the late Charlotte Curtis, then the doyenne of "society news" reporters at *The New York Times*. That was in Miss Curtis's late, "radical chic" phase when radicalism of every stripe had become a social as well as an intellectual and political fashion, and Mr. Howe qualified—at least in Miss Curtis's eyes—as one of the respected elders of the radical movement.

In choosing his essays for this volume of *Selected Writings*, Mr. Howe duly acknowledges this aspect of his career—really, a kind of sub-career in itself—as a tireless publicist for socialism as a political faith and for radical causes in general, but he does this more as a duty, one feels, than out of any sense of vindication. For even Mr. Howe must have heard the news. As the historian Eugene D.

1 *Selected Writings 1950-1990*, by Irving Howe, with an introduction by Michael Walzer; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 512 pages, $34.95.



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Genovese wrote in last month's *Commentary*:

> ...surely, the 80's will be remembered as the decade in which socialism met its Waterloo. No amount of blather about the collapse of Communism's having opened the way to "real" and "democratic" socialism will serve. The Communists, for better or worse, introduced the only socialism we have had, whereas the social democrats have everywhere settled for one or another form of state-regulated capitalism. Many things went into the making of the collapse of the Communist regimes, but, as every honest Communist from Gorbachev on admits, the immediate cause has been exposed as state ownership of the means of production —and for reasons that, alas, Ludwig von Mises, among other right-wingers, long ago identified.

Owing to this political development, which Mr. Howe allows to pass without mention in a volume of *Selected Writings* bearing the terminal date of 1990, his unavailing attempts to discover some signs of life in the ashes of the socialist idea are not only dated but profoundly disspiriting, for we are left with the impression that reality doesn't finally count for much in this discussion. For Mr. Howe, it seems, the socialist idea is far too precious to be subjected to anything as vulgar as the judgment of history. As a result, the whole "socialist" side of his writing, which over the years has in fact degenerated into a resigned embrace of the kind of facile liberalism he repeatedly denounced in his younger days, is interesting now only as an intellectual datum in the story of his own career. And even in that respect it now makes curiously distasteful reading, for time has not been kind to the unlovely habit of denouncing in other intellectuals courses of actions and shifts in belief that are not in the end significantly different from those that Mr. Howe would in practice, if not always in theory, come to adopt for himself.

Thus, in one of the many piquant avowals of intransigence that pepper his *Selected Writings* with mementos of lost radical causes, Mr. Howe has some harsh things to say about literary intellectuals who—in his view at the time—dishonored their vocation by serving as what he called "partisans of bourgeois society." Just imagine! American writers serving as "partisans of bourgeois society." Wow! Would that it had been true, which even in the decade so much despised by Mr. Howe—the Fifties—it mostly wasn't. But this was nonetheless one of the grave charges with which Mr. Howe belabored his fellow intellectuals in a once-famous essay called "This Age of Conformity," first published in *Partisan Review* in 1954 and reprinted in this volume of *Selected Writings* without comment or amendment. And what had these intellectuals done to deserve such opprobrium? Well, for one thing, they sometimes lent their talents to "middlebrow culture." Remember "middlebrow culture"? Alas, we were all a bit contemptuous of middlebrow culture in those palmy days, but now that we've seen a lot worse—even in some very highbrow circles—I suspect that we would welcome back some of that old middlebrow culture if given the chance. At the time, by the way, Mr. Howe was earning at least part of his living reviewing books for *Time* magazine, which wasn't everyone's idea of the best way to resist the temptations of bourgeois society or, for that matter, the snares of middlebrow culture, but it no doubt provided excellent practice in the art of scoring points.

Then there was that other grave charge: that American writers were getting jobs teaching in the universities. Selling out, in other words. And sure enough, before too long, Mr. Howe provided us with a vivid example of this particular form of intellectual betrayal by joining the academic ranks himself and proving to be a howling success as a professor in such places as Stanford, Brandeis, and the City University of New York. What is repulsive in all this is not, I hasten to add, that Mr. Howe wrote for *Time* or that he entered the ranks of the academy or even that he eventually found a perch that suited him in the bourgeois world (which at last reports was a smart address on the Upper East Side of Manhattan), but that



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he was so abusive, so hypocritical, and so unforthcoming about himself at the very moment when he was heaping his anathemas upon so many of his contemporaries, some of whom were in fact attempting to deal with the new cultural and political situation in the Fifties a good deal more honestly and intelligently than he was.

And who were these miscreants whom Mr. Howe was attacking as the vanguard, so to speak, of a benighted movement to conformity in the 1950s? It turns out to have been a rather hilarious cast of villains that Mr. Howe assembled for indictment in this essay: Lionel Trilling (who was singled out for special treatment), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Mary McCarthy, Daniel Boorstin, David Reisman, Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Sidney Hook, and sundry scholars and graduate students who were not, in the author's view, as stalwart as Irving Howe himself in clinging to the penurious pleasures of the old radical-bohemian way of life. Really, "This Age of Conformity" was a shoddy piece of work when it was first published, and it is shameful for it to be reprinted without apology on the present occasion. Its principal interest for us now is purely biographical, for it is a document that marked its author's passage out of the old radical intellectual milieu and into the mainstream of liberal academic culture, in which he has continued to prosper for some three and a half decades. The real relation in which Mr. Howe stood to the issue of intellectual conformity was fully revealed in the next decade. For when one or another writer on his 1954 hit list really did betray his intellectual vocation in the turmoil of the Vietnam War and the counterculture of the late Sixties and early Seventies—Mary McCarthy, for example, in her shameless reports from Hanoi—Mr. Howe was no longer inclined to speak about the conformity of intellectuals. The fact is, it was the Sixties that ushered in the real Age of Conformity in the New York intellectual world, and Mr. Howe was very much a part of it.

He still is, as we can see in the more recent political essays in the *Selected Writings*. Thus, the piece called "Reaganism: The Spirit of the Times," with its ritual obeisances to the pieties of the old radicalism, turns out to be a perfect example of what Mr. Genovese was talking about in his contribution to last month's *Commentary*:

> If the dreary remains of the left-wing press may be taken as a guide, the doughty survivors of the radical Left and of Left-liberalism—to the extent that the two can any longer be distinguished—are once again determined to make fools of themselves. Confronted by a victorious worldwide counterrevolution against everything they have stood for, they happily dwell on the evil legacy of Ronald Reagan.

Then there is the attack—by no means the first from Mr. Howe—on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn for failing to take the politically correct position on the Bolshevik Revolution. This, in turn, reminds the reader of the *Selected Writings* that among the many missing items in this volume is anything drawn from the considerable quantity of prose that Mr. Howe has devoted over the years to that earlier historian of the Bolshevik Revolution: Leon Trotsky. Considering the role that Trotsky's thought and Trotskyism as a movement have played in the formation of Mr. Howe's intellectual life, this is a remarkable omission—more significant, in some respects, than anything that *has* been included in this volume. I haven't the stomach for the task myself, but I suspect that we would have a better grasp of Mr. Howe's understanding—or misunderstanding—of history, including the history of the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath, if we were to compare his generally admiring treatment of Trotsky with the harsh judgment he has meted out to Solzhenitsyn. It is not that I believe our perspective on the Revolution must be limited to a choice between Trotsky's view and Solzhenitsyn's—far from it. But these are conspicuous among the figures Mr. Howe has chosen to discuss on this subject, and we very much need to have the Trotsky component of the discussion in evidence if we are



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to form what Mr. Howe calls a "fair picture" of his thinking.

From this and much else in and about the *Selected Writings* it is possible to arrive at a basic judgment on Irving Howe's career as a writer and as a figure in our intellectual history: Mine is that wherever the mystique of radical politics in general and the myth of socialism in particular have been allowed to dominate in his work, the result is all but worthless. It is precisely what Michael Walzer describes, in his introduction to the *Selected Writings*, as the vision of the socialist intellectual that has proven to be most perishable and regrettable in Mr. Howe's oeuvre. It is only as a chapter in the history of the political and moral folly of the intellectual Left in this century that this whole aspect of his career—and a sizable aspect it is—remains of any enduring interest. Given the wretched character of that history, Mr. Howe's contribution to it is by no means one of its more dishonorable chapters. His anti-Stalinism, for example—very much in evidence in his essay on Lillian Hellman as well as elsewhere in *Selected Writings*—does him credit, even if we must regret his failure to draw the appropriate implications from it. Yet by and large his career in politics has been an utter failure—an intellectual failure, that is. In purely careeristic terms, it has been the guarantor of his remarkable public success—a ticket to the establishment in a period when his sort of Left-liberal values have presided over, and continue to preside over, the precincts of cultural power.

It is solely in his work as a literary critic that Mr. Howe now makes an uncompromised claim to our attention, and of this—the most important part of his career—the *Selected Writings* gives us a less satisfactory account than we had reason to expect. The book begins brilliantly with an essay on Louis-Ferdinand Céline that is one of Mr. Howe's finest, and there are excellent pieces on, among other writers, Sholom Aleichem, Isaac Babel, and (surprisingly) T. E. Lawrence. Some of the other essays are too fragmentary to be effective; the one on Delmore Schwartz, for example, does not begin to encompass its subject. It is odd, moreover, that Mr. Howe should prove to be so disinclined to give more space to his criticism of contemporary writers. The essay on Philip Roth, which once caused something of a stir and prompted a well-known act of literary revenge by Mr. Roth himself, is only the most conspicuous of the missing pieces in this category; for in general there is an unexplained silence in this book about the writing of recent decades—a subject on which Mr. Howe has lavished a good deal of attention. The exceptions to this silence are not always happy ones, however. The essay on James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, called "Black Boys and Native Sons," one of the few to which Mr. Howe appends an apologetic postscript in the *Selected Writings*, might better have been left to the oblivion to which Mr. Ellison, among others, consigned it when it first appeared in 1963. Mr. Howe's claim, moreover, that "by 1990 the 'black aesthetic' movement seems to have faded" is so bizarre that it leaves one wondering if this critic is any longer paying attention to what is going on.

In two of the longer historical inquiries in the book—"The Idea of the Modern" and "The New York Intellectuals"—there is much that remains cogent even for a reader who finds the author's tendency in these essays to mourn the loss of the old radical fire a sentimental and discreditable piety. And it is on this note of sentimental piety for the socialist idea that Mr. Howe chooses to close this volume. In the essay called "Thinking about Socialism," which dates from 1985, we find Mr. Howe invoking what he calls "a liberal socialism, at once pragmatic and idealistic . . . cutting across class lines and appealing to the best in humanity," and so on. Which more or less delivers the reader into the arms of Teddy Kennedy—a denouement to this "intellectual career spanning four decades" that must be troubling even to Irving Howe in his more reflective moments.



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# The truth about Simone de Beauvoir?

## *by Renee Winegarten*

The peak of Simone de Beauvoir's literary career lies between the publication of her novel *L'Invitée (She Came to Stay)* in Paris in 1943, during the German Occupation, and 1954 when her last major novel, *Les Mandarins,* was published. Among her later works, her fiction seems rare and less impressive. Much of her time would be devoted to memoirs and autobiographical works, to her social study of old age, to prefatory and other essays. Besides, ever since she achieved international fame with Jean-Paul Sartre after the Liberation, she was engaged in public non-literary activities as the "first lady" of the postwar fellow-travelers of the revolutionary Left.

Globe-trotting in the company of Sartre, she paid visits to Soviet Russia, to Castro's Cuba, to Mao's China. They were usually given red-carpet treatment as exceptional cultural ambassadors by heads of state and leading government figures. It was an extraordinary enterprise: nothing quite like it has been seen before or since. The latter years of her life were marked by increasing militancy as a feminist. Although many of the new leaders of the feminist movement after 1968 found her standpoint outdated, they often acknowledged their debt to her, and to the striking existentialist insights of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, which she had published almost twenty years earlier.

Well before the "events" of May 1968, which brought Sartre renewed publicity, he and Simone de Beauvoir had ceased to dominate the Parisian literary and intellectual scene: existentialism had been overshadowed by other trends, and new masters now held the floor. All the same, as reputed free spirits, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and their doings were always news. Given the current upheavals and reversals in Europe, where do they stand today? At the moment, their brand of utopian revolutionary "socialism," with its blinkered hatred of Western "bourgeois" liberal democracy, appears to be discredited. Still, it may be doubted whether we have seen the last of their highly selective view of freedom.

Simone de Beauvoir died in April 1986, six years after Jean-Paul Sartre, the companion to whom she had deliberately and indissolubly linked not only her personal existence but also her literary destiny. Already, during her lifetime, there had appeared numerous studies of aspects of her writings: these treated, for instance, her love of freedom, her passion for life or its obverse, her obsession with death; the nature of her political "commitment," and the extent of her feminism. A considerable number of the interviews that she gave over the years attempt to explain her viewpoint or elucidate passages in her volumes of autobiography.

In 1985, the year before her death, there appeared in French a biography of Simone de Beauvoir by Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, based on interviews with her and with members of her family and her court, her various lovers and associates. This work



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revealed for the first time not only details about her family background but also the true facts about the death of Zaza, the young friend whose fate so haunted Simone de Beauvoir that she tried many times to transmute it into literature. The joint authors also had access to the lengthy correspondence between the creator of *Les Mandarins* and her onetime American lover, the disaffected radical novelist Nelson Algren, author of *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier made it clear, however, that theirs was not an "authorized" biography of the French writer. Nonetheless, their book fell in with Simone de Beauvoir's own desire to present her relationship with Sartre as a unique experiment in freedom. Moreover, their work went so far as to suggest that the union of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir was a great love affair in the line of Tristan and Iseult (something which even she herself had scarcely ventured to do). This work was published in English translation in 1987 with a little additional material.

Now a new biography of Simone de Beauvoir has appeared, written by Deirdre Bair, noted for her life of Samuel Beckett.[1] It employs the same method as that of her predecessors—interviews with Simone de Beauvoir herself and all those who came into contact with her and were still alive and willing to tell their tale. (As it happens, some of them were not prepared to do so.) Where Deirdre Bair differs from Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier is in her healthy disinclination to regard the much-vaunted free union between Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as some kind of ideal model.

Certainly, Simone de Beauvoir herself, while exalting their unique understanding, left enough clues for skepticism not only in the volumes of her autobiography but obliquely in her fiction. Many witnesses and critics have suggested that the special relationship could not have been all that she insisted it was, and these include a number of feminist writers as well as biographers of Sartre—Annie Cohen-Solal, for example. Sartre's biographers manage to write about him without allotting a central or dominating place to Simone de Beauvoir. The reverse cannot be said of those who write about *her*, and that is entirely her own fault.

What was Simone de Beauvoir's desired aim or "projet" (to use the existentialist terminology she adopted from Sartre) as a human being and as a writer? In adolescence she had yearned to be a writer, well before she met Sartre in 1929 at the élite Ecole Normale Supérieure. Moreover, at fifteen, she had wanted to be associated with a man of superior intellect whom she could passionately admire. In Sartre she believed that she had found a rare creative genius. Despite her own youthful academic achievements, she appears to have been convinced that she was less of a philosopher, less creative than Sartre. In addition to this essential "projet" of hers—to become a writer linked to a great man—Simone de Beauvoir always put writing first. She called writing "the great affair" of her life, a phrase she did not apply to her special relationship with Sartre. A day spent without writing left a taste of dust and ashes, she once owned. It is a revealing admission.

To compose a life of so dedicated a writer of fiction, and an autobiographer to boot, presents additional difficulties. Simone de Beauvoir, with her keen sense of the transience of all things, aimed to bear witness and to leave a record of her brief passage on the earth. In order to do so, she had to shape her experience and to project an image of her personality through her writings—"to create myself in the dimension of the imaginary," as she once expressed it. At the same time, she presented herself as a no nonsense figure, outspoken and truthful, in short, as "authentic" as it was possible for any person born into the despised bourgeois class to be. Authenticity, it will be remembered, was the highest virtue of Sartrian existentialism. All autobiographers seek to give an impression of honesty. This is what Philippe Lejeune, in his noted study of autobiography, *Le Pacte*

1 *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography*, by Deirdre Bair; Summit, 718 pages, $24.95.



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*autobiographique,* calls "the illusions of sincerity." It is the role of the biographer to try to penetrate this veil as far as it is humanly possible to do so.

Claude Francis and Fernande Gautier remarked on Simone de Beauvoir's eagerness to cooperate with them. Naturally, she wanted to put the record straight—but on *her* terms. As they declare in the introduction they produced for the English translation of their book, there were certain matters that she wanted to "keep off the record." On occasion, they pointed out to her that what she was now telling them contradicted what she had written in her autobiography. "My memoirs are not the Bible!" she retorted. Clearly, such divergences were not necessarily due to the possibly failing memory of an old lady, but rather they arose from an enterprise of art that molded human clay into literary shape.

Apparently, Simone de Beauvoir was just as keen to cooperate with Deirdre Bair as she had been with Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier. Nothing delighted her more than thinking and talking about herself and her own life. Indeed, this was to be in some sense the "authorized" biography, but as it proved, deceptively so. What Simone de Beauvoir offered to give her new biographer was a truthful account of everything that she could not or did not want to say in her memoirs. This did not mean that she was going to reveal all.

The limits of her cooperation are thus manifest. She was quite prepared to correct certain matters of fact, to enlarge upon what she had said at certain points in her autobiography. But she really did not wish to go any further. Nor, indeed, could she do so without undermining or destroying the image that she had so carefully created over the years. If the reader looks at the matter from the point of view of art and the artist, such an attitude seems perfectly reasonable. However, it is not at all satisfactory for the biographer in quest of "the truth." Nowhere is the limit set by Simone de Beauvoir in her truthfulness face to face with Deirdre Bair more apparent than in the famous matter of her personal relationship with Sartre, the area of her intellectual collaboration with him and her considerable contribution to his work.

It was she, after all, who first disclosed in her autobiography the ever since much discussed, much admired, envied and imitated two-year "pact" made between Sartre and herself at the beginning of their bohemian-style liaison. Neither of them favored anything to do with "bourgeois" marriage. Nor did they wish to have children who would interfere with their writing and personal liberty. Besides, Sartre owned to her straight away that he had no intention of staying faithful to one woman alone. However, it was agreed that Simone de Beauvoir would remain the one "necessary" love and the rest would be "contingent" loves. In this way they would totally renew the relations between men and women, since she too was to enjoy the same degree of freedom. The fact that this "contract" resembled a so-called open marriage in all but name, rather than some unique utopian libertarian arrangement, did not appear to strike them (or their fascinated disciples, who are still with us).

This "pact" was rapidly followed by another, even more optimistic, in which they promised never to lie to each other. They were to tell each other everything. This meant in effect that Sartre could take a certain sadistic pleasure in recounting to her in his letters the sometimes unsavory intimate details of his various love affairs. An occasional reproof at his behavior ensued.

As Simone de Beauvoir expressed it in general terms, years before she was to publish Sartre's letters: "If two speakers convince each other that they dominate events and people about whom they exchange confidences, on the pretext of practising sincerity, they are deceiving themselves." She spoke of a kind of honesty that is simply "flagrant hypocrisy." When such candor functions in the sphere of sexuality, it does not aim to create an intimate understanding between a man and a woman; on the contrary, it serves "to provide one of them—



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most often the man—with a facile alibi: he cherishes the delusion that, by confessing his infidelities, he atones for them, when in fact he is inflicting a double violence on his partner." In the light of Sartre's letters, this passage now appears to have a personal and private resonance: complete candor in this context is seen as not merely hypocritical and self-serving on the part of the man, but deeply wounding as well.

In his novel *L'Age de raison (The Age of Reason),* written in 1939, Sartre treated the question of total sincerity between two lovers whose liaison has lasted many years: Mathieu, a projection of the novelist, and his mistress, the wretched Marcelle. They too have made a pact to tell all. According to Michel Contat, the well-known authority on Sartre's work, Marcelle "is so obviously the opposite of Simone de Beauvoir—whose place she fills in the constellation of roles surrounding the hero [Mathieu]—that one wonders if Sartre did not make his companion unrecognizable in order to settle accounts with her just the same, whether unconsciously or not." The great distinction between Mathieu and his creator, however, is that the fictional character tells his mistress that he no longer loves her (whereas Sartre was quite content to renew the pact after ten years). Mathieu has cause to feel sorry later, because it was with Marcelle alone that he could discuss freely all his fears and hopes.

In an interview that he gave in 1945, when *L'Age de raison* was published, Sartre stressed Mathieu's guilt in not being "truly committed" to Marcelle. "They say that they tell each other everything: in reality, they never stop lying, because their relationship is false and deceptive," he remarked. At that time, the general public knew nothing about the "pact" with Simone de Beauvoir. The reader may well wonder now why Sartre chose in his novel and his pronouncements on it to give such a dark version of a pact similar to that between Simone de Beauvoir and himself.

Naturally, it is a delicate and even perilous matter to try to interpret life through fictional works. The characters in a novel are not tied exactly to their ostensible models in real life. In any case, there may be several sources for one fictional character and these sources in all likelihood will be jumbled together, as with Henri in *Les Mandarins* who embraces elements of Simone de Beauvoir herself as well as of Camus. Moreover, the connection may not be literal but subtly emotive or figurative. All the same, it seems a pity not to explore the resources of fiction and to use the tools of literary criticism, provided this is done with nuance and discretion. Neither Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, nor Deirdre Bair, avail themselves of this instrument. And yet in different ways both Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir actually suggest such a connection between their art and their life.

As novelists, they are not highly imaginative and inventive writers: they often draw fairly directly on their own emotional dilemmas and inner crises, and upon their actual "situation." This was an inevitable consequence of their existentialist view of fiction —what she was to call "the metaphysical novel." According to her, a fictional character is defined by his or her metaphysical anguish, revolt, fear of death, rather than by psychological traits in the nineteenth-century manner. Thus her fictional personages tend to be endowed with the same private varieties of existential *angst,* like her own strange childhood rages or her sudden youthful loss of religious belief. Indeed, it is a concept that makes for a certain monotony.

Writing to Simone de Beauvoir on May 10, 1940, Sartre observed that "we have *put* ourselves in our novels." With regard to her novel, *L'Invitée,* as well as his own *L'Age de raison,* he added: "we display ourselves, we speak of each other, of our little affairs, of the sort of people we love . . ." Such words might be kept in mind, particularly when trying to assess the special relationship. Much of Simone de Beauvoir's fiction offers a fairly negative impression of the male figures who, in the experience of her feminine characters, occupy a position loosely related to that of Sartre in her own. The theme of women who have been abandoned by their lovers or



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husbands figures ever more prominently in her work. She once notably defined literature as "clever lies which tell the truth."

One of the principal threads of Deirdre Bair's book is the attempt to uncover the difference between Simone de Beauvoir's gloss on the special relationship with Sartre and the actuality, by questioning the novelist and autobiographer herself. Not surprisingly, the seeker after truth comes up against a blank wall—and this, despite all Simone de Beauvoir's apparent candor. The German writer Alice Schwarzer, who interviewed Simone de Beauvoir between 1972 and 1982, remarked upon "her notoriously dismissive manner when situations or people do not suit her." The novelist's sense of her own superiority to everyone but Sartre (and of his superiority to the rest, so that he must necessarily always be in the right) was such that she could be quite contemptuous even of those who formed her closest circle. This is made perfectly plain in her recently published correspondence with him which, she long maintained to all and sundry, had been "lost."[2]

Whenever, in the role of diligent interviewer, Deirdre Bair sought to penetrate further, the author of *The Second Sex* became "furious" or "outraged." The very notion that she could have suffered by placing herself and her own work in second place to Sartre and his, made her "furious." Questions about her writing that required her interpretation tended to make her "angry." And so did queries about her contribution to Sartre's work and the extent of her collaboration with him. Any hint that the special relationship with Sartre might be something that owed much to her own powers of creation elicited more "anger" and "outrage" than any other query.

Although Deirdre Bair poses the right questions, she does not ask the one that should follow and that pursues the reader throughout her book, namely, why did Simone de Beauvoir respond with such fury to this line of questioning? What degree of suppression for the sake of art and image was at work here? What bottled-up feelings of wrath and bitter resentment underlay the public expressions of harmony and frankness? She liked to use an almost regal "we" when speaking of Sartre and herself as being of one mind. No doubt, after many years of association, they did often tend to sound like a long-married intellectual couple. But at times that reiterated "we" looks like an attempt to appropriate Sartre and to promote an ideal unity.

Sartre's letters, edited by herself and published without authorization after his death, largely in order to give proof of his attachment to her, did not entirely fulfill this purpose. His repeated protestations of love for her, his frequent attempts to reassure her while spending time with one or other of his current mistresses, sound as if they are made "by rote," as Deirdre Bair suggests, and she adds aptly that they are so much "metaphorical glue." There was even one occasion when Sartre actually destroyed some of Simone de Beauvoir's letters which she had asked him to keep for her, because they could prove useful for her work. The reason he gave was that he was sharing a room with his mistress of the moment (Wanda Kosakiewicz), and he did not want them to fall into the young woman's hands. Any dedicated writer of Simone de Beauvoir's passionate intensity would surely regard this as an intellectual betrayal, possibly worse than the more commonplace sort of infidelity.

Indeed, Sartre does not come out of Deirdre Bair's book in a very good light. As the eternal Don Juan, ever in quest of youth, he shows many signs of emotional immaturity. He makes use of Simone de Beauvoir as mental stimulus; as a most helpful critic, editor, organizer; as a buffer against the pressures of the outside world; in short, as a sort of reliable protective mother-figure. And, when he gets the chance, he escapes with relief from her extremely useful but nanny-like presence. There is the evidence of Arthur Koestler, who met Sartre by chance on a train in 1950, after their celebrated

2 *Lettres à Sartre*, by Simone de Beauvoir; vol. 1, 1930-39, vol. 2, 1940-63; Gallimard, 120.00 FF each.



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break, and who remarked that without "la Simone" Sartre was not only friendly but like a boy out of school. Certainly, there was no love lost between Koestler and herself, especially after the fiasco of a night together, but he was scarcely "that arrogant fool," as she once loftily declared.

Speaking of the pact in her autobiography, Simone de Beauvoir observed: "I knew that no misfortune would ever come to me through him, unless he were to die before I did." Her newly published letters to him will doubtless disappoint militant feminists by their frequent tearfulness as well as the mawkishness of her constant asseverations of love for him and faith in their inseparable unity. She had declined his offer of marriage (apparently never renewed), but she then lived to see him make the same offer later on to a succession of mistresses. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier use her assertion (about no misfortune coming to her through Sartre) as an epigraph, yet the evidence to the contrary, often provided by Simone de Beauvoir herself in her writings, is overwhelming. Sartre's conduct would frequently make her unhappy. She might profess to feel no jealousy, but her words often reveal how jealous she was of some of Sartre's women, especially the beautiful and gifted.

It was fear and jealousy that made her obtain leave from her teaching post in Rouen in order to hasten—twice—to Berlin, because Sartre, who was engaged in research at the French Institute there in 1933-34, had fallen in love with the wife of one of his colleagues. Then there was Sartre's profound obsession with Olga Kosakiewicz, one of her own pupils in Rouen, an obsession that inspired the anguish of the "trio" in *L'Invitée*. (Strikingly, this imbroglio is dramatically resolved in the novel when the older woman murders the young intruder.) The preoccupation with Olga was followed by Sartre's "serious" passion for her sister, Wanda.

These girls, with a number of later mistresses, were drawn into the orbit of the court or "family," as it was called. In this way Simone de Beauvoir contrived to see that ultimately they would not challenge her dominant position. However, a far more "serious" threat would be posed by Dolorès Vanetti, with whom Sartre became involved on his first visit to the United States in 1945. In a certain light, there is an element of tit-for-tat in Simone de Beauvoir's much publicized passionate affair with Nelson Algren, which began after she became aware of the gravity of Sartre's commitment to Dolorès (short-lived as this commitment was eventually to prove).

It was in the companions' last years that the gap between them visibly widened and proved more difficult to conceal. The place occupied by Arlette El-Kaïm, an Algerian-born Jewish student of Sartre's work who became his mistress, grew larger and more "serious." The news that Sartre had adopted Arlette as his daughter came as a shock to Simone de Beauvoir, who had not been informed of this unforeseen move. (She herself was later to adopt her young friend, Sylvie Le Bon.) To Sartre, there might be a certain practical logic in making the younger woman his literary heir; yet by leaving no will, he virtually ensured the somewhat unseemly quarrels between the two women after his death. His biographer Ronald Hayman regards his conduct as an "act of vengeance" against Simone de Beauvoir.

Worse was to come when Sartre, now a very sick man, fell under the influence of his new secretary, the Cairo-born stateless Jew Benny Lévy, known as Pierre Victor, one-time Maoist who turned Talmudist. This protégé found an ally in Arlette. Sartre began to show a surprising interest in Judaism and to repudiate some of his earlier views—notions which, after all, Simone de Beauvoir had often helped to formulate, and which had long been part of her very life and spirit. His lifelong cult of youth seemed bound to win against the outraged remonstrances of his aging companion and the indignation of the rest of the established Sartrian entourage.

Simone de Beauvoir was not above employing literature, consciously or unconsciously, as a means of revenge. As she told Deirdre Bair, her version of her friend Zaza's tragic



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destiny, in the first volume of her autobiography, was used as a way of punishing everyone she blamed for it. Her resentment is frequently shown in her manner of settling scores with her protégées or rivals. She remained unforgiving toward her right-wing father, regarded as exemplar of the odious bourgeois class. There is something distasteful in her description of the physical infirmities of her dying mother, as in her detailed account of Sartre's hapless decline into incontinence. The faithful may regard such revelations as a form of therapy for herself and her readers: yet these disclosures also grant the writer considerable power over the recently dead. With Simone de Beauvoir, for whom writing was the supreme affair in her life, ink took precedence over blood. She never understood why Nelson Algren felt so aggrieved when she elaborated upon their affair and quoted from his letters to her without his permission. Other members of her intimate circle were sometimes equally offended by what they regarded as her ruthlessly cool betrayal of trust.

Were Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir reconciled at the last? inquires his biographer Annie Cohen-Solal. After the line of Ernest Dowson they had once favored, had Sartre been faithful to her, Cynara, in his fashion? The author of *La Cérémonie des adieux* would like us to believe so in the touching scene where the dying Sartre tells her that he loves her. Yet he had never had the slightest trouble in repeatedly telling countless others as much. Since there is no way of verifying this farewell, perhaps a healthy skepticism might be in order. And what is to be made of her last frustrated attempt to take possession of Sartre by lying down with his corpse in a scene of high melodrama?

Skepticism might also be exercised about the vexed question of abortion. Deirdre Bair accepts Simone de Beauvoir's vehement denial: the author of *The Second Sex* told her biographer that she had never had an abortion. All the same, during her period as a militant feminist in the 1970s, and the agitation for the repeal of the anti-abortion law, Simone de Beauvoir joined with other women in declaring publicly that she had had an abortion; and at the Bobigny trial she actually admitted as much under oath. Significantly, the subject of abortion also provides one of the main themes of Sartre's novel *L'Age de raison*. That sharp-tongued Catholic writer, François Mauriac, was later maliciously to qualify Sartre as a "bachelor novelist whose characters have so curious an obsession with abortion." Moreover, in Simone de Beauvoir's novel *Le Sang des autres (The Blood of Others)* the heroine undergoes a back-street abortion, depicted in grisly detail. The evidence of fiction is scarcely conclusive, but the question remains: was Simone de Beauvoir lying under oath or not? Doubtless, for the moment, the biographer might leave the matter open.

What is at stake here, in the association of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, is the idea of some rare new kind of relationship in perfect truth and freedom. Despite its occasional strains and stresses, the author of *The Second Sex* persists in upholding it as something unique and rather marvelous. Like all attempts to project an image for posterity, this one was also to prove a thoroughly futile enterprise. Given her dread of nothingness, her sense of the vanity of vanities—what she liked to call "the point of view of Sirius"—she must have known its futility. Underlying much of her writing is the rhetorical question *"A quoi bon?"* ("What is the use?"), to be found in her essay "Pyrrhus et Cinéas" (1944). It is posed by Cinéas, who goes on with his task just the same, as she did.

Much ink has been spilt over the conduct of French writers and intellectuals under the German Occupation. Immediately after the Liberation, there was probably a real need or desire on the part of British and American literary journalists to produce intellectual leaders of the French Resistance movement, and they hastened to promote Sartre and Camus among others in this role. Since then, the actions of these luminaries have been weighed in the balance and found wanting to greater or lesser degree, according to the moral severity of the critic's judgment.



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Anyone who examines Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs with care will uncover considerable fiddling with dates in the account of her move away from a prewar apolitical stance. She places her conversion to "solidarity" in the spring of 1939—apparently before Sartre's—although it seems to have had no effect until much later. It is put there, I believe, for the purpose of enhancing her Resistance credentials. In order to keep her teaching post in Paris after the debacle of June 1940, she had to sign a document that she was neither a freemason nor a Jew (presumably she had to work to live). She would have been quite happy to receive the Goncourt prize for *L'Invitée,* although the jury included writers well known to be compromised. When, in January 1943, she lost her job as a teacher, she found a position with that mendacious network, Radio Vichy —merely preparing innocuous programs, as she relates cursorily in her autobiography. Many years later, speaking to Deirdre Bair, she considered herself to be "untainted." Nonetheless, she did not want some researcher poking around in the wartime radio archives; and she would have liked to silence "that bastard," a French writer who was supposedly about to impugn the wartime conduct of Sartre and herself.

The fact was that she did nothing to correct the legend of their heroic resistance to the Nazis: on the contrary, she discreetly helped it along. It was not just her careful examination of the moral dilemmas of the active members of the Resistance movement depicted in her so-called Resistance novel, *Le Sang des autres.* After the War, in her article "Jean-Paul Sartre. Strictly Personal," published in *Harper's Bazaar* in January 1946, she claimed that Sartre had played "an active part in the Resistance." Such words can hardly be applied to his activities. Deirdre Bair shows how suspect he appeared to a number of those engaged in the underground Resistance movement. Readers who take Robert Dubreuilh in *Les Mandarins* to be modeled on Sartre might readily confuse the actual writer and philosopher with the fictional former Resistance hero. If Simone de Beauvoir could hardly be expected to issue disclaimers about their heroic role, all the same she had her share in the myth. Perhaps she eventually came to believe in it herself.

The illusion of some utopian freedom, to be enjoyed by a radically changed human creature in a totally new kind of society, underlies her feminism as well as her political stance—after Sartre's—in the years following the Liberation. Neither of them believed in reform, and she once notoriously averred that they both thought society could only be changed "globally, at one blow, through a violent convulsion." Not until her very last years did she modify slightly her attachment to this view.

Up to then, a vague "building of socialism" through revolution was her aim and panacea. Any regime (however dubious) that claimed to possess this essential key would be lauded at the expense of existing open democracies. Her book on what she thought was "the real America"—it owes much to Nelson Algren, who took her on a tour of Chicago's lower depths and reinforced her preconceptions—has vanished into oblivion. It seems very likely to remain there, together with her book about her brief visit to China, based on her reading and on what she was told by Chinese guides and officials. She would inform Deirdre Bair that she was "embarrassed" by this work but not "ashamed" of it—probably a considerable admission for her, if scarcely a sufficient curtsy to standards of journalistic probity.

The literary biographer of a long-deceased personage may sometimes regret that the subject is not available for interview, and that only texts and/or correspondence and the comments of contemporaries remain. Yet such interviews lead only so far. Assiduous as Deirdre Bair proves to be in her dealings with the author of *Les Mandarins,* she does not probe her subject's inner life. Religion occupied a large place in Simone de Beauvoir's early youth, for she was educated in Catholic schools and institutions up to the age of about eighteen, and she eventually replaced religious faith with belief in political uto-



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pianism. Some idea of the intensity of her religious commitment and soul-searching as a girl was revealed by an extract from one of her notebooks (published in *Le Monde* on May 30, 1986). It is an aspect of her personality that merits larger inquiry.

According to Robert Gittings, noted for his studies of Keats and Hardy, the art of biography should reveal the greatness as well as the littleness of its subject. Certainly, Simone de Beauvoir had the generosity of spirit to hate injustice and the energy to use her reputation to defy it. At the least, she raised the consciousness of women (and, by extension, men) throughout the world with *The Second Sex*. She also served as an acute witness of her era, its moral quandaries, illusions, temptations.

Now, with *Les Samouraïs,* the Bulgarian-born psychiatrist and semiologist Julia Kristeva has published a novel directly modeled on *Les Mandarins*, though lacking its distinction and its narrative drive. In her turn, she seeks to portray the intellectual outlook and varied sexual proclivities of her own generation. A thinly disguised Philippe Sollers (her husband), Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Philip Roth take the stage instead of the thinly disguised Sartre, Camus, Koestler, and Algren. Such fond imitation shows that the impact of Simone de Beauvoir as intellectual and as free-living writer still endures in France.

Today there is surely need, however, to question the ideas of truth and freedom purveyed by Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who have had so lasting and, in many ways, misguided an influence on succeeding generations of writers and intellectuals (among others). Sartre told the noted journalist Olivier Todd that he lied to Simone de Beauvoir more than to any of his mistresses. They both lied to their various lovers and to members of their court. In short, they lied to each other and to the world. The great proponents of truth-telling, freedom, and authenticity were deceivers: they were—unsurprisingly—no more truthful, free, and authentic than those whom they used and regarded as lesser mortals.



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# Modern instances: the art of the Macchiaioli

*by W.S. Di Piero*

In 1903, several years before his decisive involvement with Marinetti and Futurism, Umberto Boccioni made a painting called *Roman Landscape* that shows a cow grazing in a dense field of grass and wildflowers. The field is a storm of sparky greens, mustards, reds, yellows. The conventional solidities and illusionist depth of realist painting are transfigured into the sheared all-over textures of Monet and Pissarro. It's the kind of Impressionist scene that Clement Greenberg described as "decentralized, with a surface knit together of a multiplicity of identical and similar elements." But the cow, high in the right corner, is affixed to that wiry, moiling surface like boilerplate, alien to the presentation of the scene. It's as if Boccioni were pressing an Italian emblem onto French technique, to nationalize it perhaps, but also to rehearse what had been a crucial moment in Italian art.

That cow, with its even textures and inflections of light, is a Macchiaioli cow. For decades, oxen and cows had been a salient motif for a group of painters in Tuscany called the Macchiaioli, and no Italian painter at the turn of the century could pretend to ignore their existence, though in the making of modernist art their influence would be not nearly so decisive as that of the Impressionists. By the end of the century, the technique called *la macchia,* first developed in the late 1850s, had long been the most familiar manner in Italian realist painting, though by 1900 most painters were forsaking it in favor of French techniques.

Boccioni painted no other picture like this one, and his own lurching career is like a speeded-up narrative of the attempts of Italian artists to make a new way for themselves after the consolidations of Italian realism. Within a few years he would be painting brooding, Magnasco-esque pictures of the industrial outskirts of Milan, and soon thereafter constructing paintings that were practically illustrations of the Futurist aesthetic program. Futurism itself was in part a jumpy, urban revolt against the pastoral pieties of much Macchiaioli painting.

The best discussions of the Macchiaioli in English are Norma Broude's comprehensive *The Macchiaioli* and the exhibition catalogue *The Macchiaioli: Painters of Italian Life 1850-1900,* both of which I've drawn on here.[1] Like most studies of the subject, both begin with an analysis of the word *"mac-*

1 *The Macchiaioli: Italian Painters of the Nineteenth Century*, by Norma Broude, was published by Yale University Press in 1987. "The Macchiaioli: Painters of Italian Life 1850-1900" was on view at at the Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, from February 25 through April 20, 1986, and at Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts, from June 21 through August 6, 1986. The catalogue was edited by Edith Tonelli and Katherine Hunt, with contributions by Dario Durbè, Denis Mack Smith, Albert Boime, and Piero Dini.



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*chia."* In common usage a macchia is a stain, a blotch, a smear. Technically, a macchia is also a quickly executed color sketch. *"Macchiare"* means to apply color through direct observation of a subject; Vasari used the term to describe works by Giorgione and the aged Titian, both of whom "drew" with color directly on the canvas. The macchia therefore conveys immediacy, spontaneity, on-the-spot transcription loosened from the definitions of preliminary drawing and studio deliberations. The essence of macchia effect is the flashing expression of sensation, boldly and simply, with color-stains. It has its place in the line of stylistic continuity that runs from Tintoretto's sketchy spectral musculatures to Caravaggio's and Goya's voluptuous draftsmanship with the brush, down to the fibrillating colorism of late Impressionism and the instinctualism of Abstract Expressionism. For the original Macchiaioli, perfecting their technique during the movement's peak years in the early 1860s, the macchia was also a structural instrument, a critical method for probing in a new way the action of light on objects. Telemaco Signorini, writing in 1874 long after he had repudiated the macchia, described it as nothing more than an exaggerated, violent chiaroscuro, which for him and other young painters was initially exciting because it replaced the thinned-out, feeble chiaroscuro of academic painting with a robust, frontal, emotionally responsive colorism.

Although they reacted against academic convention—many of them, like Signorini, got their formal training at Florence's Accademia di Belle Arti—the Macchiaioli adapted to their own purposes the preparatory sketching *alla mezza-macchia* that they had learned at school, using flattened aggressive contrasts and bulky solidities of color. They worked up this exercise into a master style especially suited to the *plein air* painting they favored. As a technique, that is to say as a process of representing a felt vision of reality, the macchia could interrogate the coincidences or interpenetrations of light and matter in a more dynamic way than was available to them in the example of Barbizon painting, which they all admired. They wanted, in other words, a more nervous, instantaneous answer to the nature they sought to copy. Diego Martelli, Degas's friend and eloquent apologist for Macchiaioli art, described their intentions in these terms: "To be charmed by a tonality that nature presents, to translate it with color so that in this translation are reflected all the effects of nature herself and all of the sensations that the soul of the artist has experienced."

The landscape they painted most often was the Maremma, the coastal plains and scrubland southwest of Florence legendary as a refuge for outlaws. One word for that kind of wooded area is macchia: *"fare alla macchia"* means to hide out in the woods. A Tuscan word for outlaw is *"macchiajuolo."* So when a sardonic reviewer in 1862 referred to the new painters who exhibited at Italy's 1861 National Exposition as *macchiajuoli,* the term linked the new style to social mischief. The title inevitably took on a political suggestiveness, since by the late 1850s Italy had commenced upon the Risorgimento, the rebellions, wars of liberation, geographical redefinitions, and political realignments that in 1870 culminated in unification and freedom from Austrian occupation.

The macchia emerged as a national, or nationalist, style. The coincidence of the new painting and political change was so intense—some of the painters fought in the wars of unification and the Caffè Michelangiolo in Florence, their favorite haunt, was a famous gathering place for activists—that one historian of the movement, Dario Durbè, insists that political engagement "was a matter of primary, almost existential importance for the Macchiaioli." I'm not qualified to judge the truth of that assertion, but I can say that the Risorgimento sentiments flaring in some macchia painting, and not only in the actual battle scenes painted by Giovanni Fattori and others, was a natural volatility of style, of the macchia itself, a supple technique for expressing the doubt, exuberance, rage, discouragement, and sullenness the artists felt during that difficult



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time. The macchia effect was, after all, one of fleetingness, undeliberateness, almost improvisation, and momentarily arrested changefulness. In its finest expressions it was technical skirmishing raised to an imperious style: it absorbed accidents of light, it thrived on expressive impatience, it delighted in the thrill of formal uncertainty which was in some way infused with the anxious political atmosphere of the time.

The development of the macchia in the 1860s, the presence of Martelli and others conversant in both Italian and French art, the careers of painters like Federico Zandomeneghi and Giovanni Boldini who began as Macchiaioli but changed their styles while living in Paris, all suggest some lively connection between the macchia and Impressionism. The Macchiaioli are still sometimes referred to as "Italian Impressionists." They remained separate enterprises, however, while unknowingly sharing one or two ambitions. Macchiaioli painting developed as a form of realism in a more scrupulous and less adventurous fashion than the Impressionistic realism of Manet and Degas, but at the same time it investigated color and volume in ways that bind it to the troubled agitations of nineteenth-century representation. The occasional coincidences are startling. Monet said that Ruskin's *Elements of Drawing,* published in 1857 (and studied by the young Seurat), contained most of the theory of Impressionist painting, because of its emphasis on the need to paint what the eye actually sees, the reality which in Ruskin's words "presents itself to your eyes only as an arrangement of patches of different colors variously shaded." That in fact describes the Macchiaioli's method of representing objects in *macchie* of color. They were in their own way seeking to recover what Ruskin called the innocence of the eye, painting out of "a sort of childlike perception of these flat stains of color" which were the compositional elements of the world. The macchia was a means of copying those elements, though its emphasis was on *technique,* on the manner of applying paint. The Macchiaioli were not concerned, as were the Impressionists, with the dynamics of perception, subjectivity, and the self-aware drama of optics. They were more caught up in painting as a recovery, not a remaking or remastering, of the real, and this puts them on the other side of the mirror that stands as passage to modern painting.

The macchia is important to our understanding of modern representation because of its preservation, in the finished work, of the look of the *plein air* sketch. Sharp contrasts and highlighting, fat light, patchy swabbed brushwork, these are the effects the Macchiaioli heightened in the studio, giving the provisional and indeterminate a finished look. It was very obviously an act of copying, of getting down the appearance of nature in a particular way, but the macchia stopped short of fusing itself to the whole scenic matrix of the subject, as the *plein air* painting of Monet and Pissarro did. Fattori, the most prolific and complex of the Macchiaioli and a superb *all'aperto* painter, considered himself not a neo-Barbizon chronicler of landscape, nor a radical singularizer for whom an optical impression sufficed as an emotionally true copy of nature. For him the technique of copying nature was above all an act of witness keyed to registers of feeling. With that assumption he could not pursue the project that Greenberg attributes to Impressionism, that of pushing "the faithful representation of nature so far that representational painting was turned inside out." But in pushing painting toward an irreducibility of technique, he and other Macchiaioli contributed to the pressures exerted on representation, unaware that the definitive sketchiness they practiced would become in the new century a master style.

The Macchiaioli did not consider their panel and cardboard sketches finished works; they entered in exhibitions only canvases completed in their studios. But the sketches are today among their most compelling works because we experience them as genetic material in the evolution of modern representation, in particular the way they confer on momentary vision the value of the



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permanent and realized. The most exquisite of Macchiaioli paintings is Fattori's *Rotonda di Palmieri* (1866) in the Gallery of Modern Art in the Palazzo Pitti. (With the museums in Livorno and Montecatini, the Pitti has the best collection of Macchiaioli painting in Italy.) Fattori's little (4 3/4" x 13 3/4") oil sketch on wood shows seven women in long skirts and shawls under an awning by the sea. The depth is collapsed into a stack of high-contrast colors banded across the surface: a yellowish canopy with a serrated edge laid on a strip of white sky, and under that a sloping purplish promontory, blue water, and muted sunlight skirting a roseate olive-green ground. The figures are deployed at vertical levels, as if on risers; the four faces visible are color blanks. The effect is geological, anonymous fossilized human shapes fixed in mineral strata. The sketchiness, along with the severe color solidities, mysteriously intensifies the stillness of the scene.

Although they were trained primarily as *plein air* painters, the Macchiaioli ranged far and wide for their subjects. Feeling the excitement and pressures of the new medium of photography—the Alinari family, Italy's first important photographers, opened a studio in Florence in 1854—they applied the macchia to the task of recording the diverse textures of contemporary Italian life. They had the old and the new right there before them. Florence was a commercial and political center (and from 1865 to 1871 the nation's capital), its suburbs were being developed and industrialized, its countryside hosted ancient peasant cultures and middle-class villas. The responses of the Macchiaioli, particularly of the three pre-eminent artists Signorini, Silvestro Lega, and Fattori, were so distinct that even to speak of them as a solidarity, as they indeed sometimes identified themselves, seems an historical convenience, for they differed one from another as much as did Monet, Pissarro, and Sisley. Each of these three, around the mid-1860s, began to paint in ways which, while less boldly asserting the macchia as a signature technique, absorbed macchia effects into the more expansive, acquisitive ambitions of realism. Eventually, the stress lines where realism tried to recover the material world began to fracture under the pressure of modern facts and feelings.

In 1860 Signorini produced many renderings of scenes in La Spezia. In one sketch on cardboard, *Fountain at La Spezia*, the liquid charcoal shape of the fountain is centered inside a blocky gray archway; the other scenic elements are similarly amassed, subaqueous darks pitched against lights. That same year he made an oil study called *A Sunny Day at La Spezia* in which the volumes of light and shadow are constructed in patchy strokes; here, too, there is a theatrical space created by an archway, beneath which are grouped several unarticulated figures. The next year, Signorini exhibited in Turin the finished picture from that sketch, but now the title was *The Ghetto of Venice*, and the massive street scene roughed out in the sketch has been articulated as a squalid, cramped passageway in Venice's ancient Jewish quarter. There was certainly some kind of opportunism in Signorini's modifications; the Risorgimento preached religious tolerance and encouraged the breakup of the old ghettos, and Venice in 1861 was still under Austrian control. But just as important was his willfulness in adjusting and pushing macchia technique—in the finished work the figures hunkered and walking in the mean passageway are pulled from vertiginous contrasts—to investigate resistant, provocative subject matter.

The Macchiaioli often went on outings together and painted the same subjects. One famous pair of paintings, by Signorini and Cristiano Banti, is titled *Children in Sunlight* (*circa* 1860-1862). Both are executed in conventional macchia style, and yet Signorini's version is much more agitated in its rhythms than Banti's rather stolid rendering. Signorini's displays an almost neurotic alertness to chiaroscuro as a register of feeling, and the handling has a raciness that is thrilling.

Other artists practiced the macchia with captivating and often moving effect. Giuseppe Abbati, Vito D'Ancona, Vincenzo Cabianca, and Odoardo Borrani, all first-



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generation Macchiaioli and contemporaries of Signorini, produced many paintings that are, to me at least, more interesting than a lot of Barbizon painting.

Because it was defined and circumscribed by its effects, the macchia was not driven by the passion of the encounter between the inquiring imagination and the material presence of its subject. In 1862 Signorini repudiated the macchia in the interest of achieving what he called "a better realism." He did not mean that he aspired to include more patriotic or polemical contents—he had already painted in 1859 the much-praised Risorgimento scene *The Tuscan Artillerymen at Montechiero Greeted by the French Wounded at Solferino*—but wanted rather to paint modern instances. He did not unlearn or suppress macchia technique in pursuing his new subjects of rural labor, marketplaces, city streets, and institutions; in fact, the macchia's pasty indefiniteness enabled him to paint in such a way that the subject often seems to be coming into existence there on the ever more flattened picture plane. The consciousness revealed to us is not so much one exercising bold moods of light and shadow as one somehow contending with its subjects. The creation of an effect, which was properly the end of most macchia painting, was overtaken by an apprehending realism which, on a few occasions, brought Signorini close to the transfigurative realism of Degas, Cézanne, and the young Matisse.

Passing through Florence in 1875, where he had relatives and where he had worked on his picture of the Bellelli family some years earlier, Degas saw in Signorini's studio *The Ward of Madwomen at San Bonifazio* in Florence and liked it so much that he carried news of it back to his friends in Paris. Apart from the strangely vaulted but compressed spaces in the picture, and the broken arrangement of figures in their space, Degas must also have admired the way the dozen or so women in grubby gowns, most of them sitting on a long bench against the left-hand wall, are each an invincible solitude. This is a social group, of sorts, where no evident relation exists among its members except a shared general devastation.

Degas's figure groups, such as *The Bellelli Family* or the later scenes in business offices and milliner shops, all have that extraordinary self-containment, or separateness, of individual figures participating in some society. The isolation of the women in Signorini's picture, however, is both symptom and intensifier of derangement, each pose an articulation of disorder: one lies on the floor clutching a table-leg; another sits twisting head in hand like mortar and pestle; one shakes a fist at a vision only she can see; another stands queenly in the middle of the floor, staring at a wall. The drab light admitted by high windows seeps into the figures; the dingy illumination burnished on the walls is in high contrast to the sulphurous dark of the inmate figures. The familiar sunniness and color solidities of the macchia are converted in this picture to a grander purpose: the sunniness is scoured, abraded, and the solidities are combed to a finer, intenser plasticity. The chiaroscuro is not chiefly effect, it is the affective response to an instance of chaos incarnate.

In subsequent years Signorini explored a variety of contemporary subjects. The dissonant tonalities of urban life attracted him, and he met them with a technical audacity his Macchiaioli experience had prepared him for. In *Leith,* the best known of the works produced during a trip to England and Scotland in 1881, he contracts perspective in such a way that the people on the street —window shoppers, a policeman, highlanders, a woman pushing a pram—are spread out beneath the blazon of a Rob Roy whisky advertisement painted on a wall. Social relations are being lived out beneath that great sign, with its recollection of the Scottish hero and Scott's (then recent) retelling of it, as if the language of commerce were a new, watchful, volcanic deity. The sign's checkered red letters have a Day-Glo intensity, and I don't know any other painting of the time that filled so much canvas space with the kind of aggressive commercial message that many decades later would be-



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come both subject and method of much Pop Art. In 1894, Signorini returned to the subject of imprisonment with *The Prison at Portoferraio,* which Norma Broude in her book rightly proposes as a companion piece to the asylum picture. More than anything Signorini did, this picture approaches the florid depthlessness of early modernist painting. Although the subject and volatile handling of *Prison* set it apart from the cooler landscapes and small-town scenes he was painting around that time, works like *View from the Sanctuary at Riomaggiore* and *Street Gossip in Riomaggiore,* they are all of a piece with Signorini's mature enterprise: not to render a subject in a style but to make style the expressive means of finding the true emotional pitch of a subject.

In *Prison* two files of prisoners recede from the foreplane toward the rear of a long, barred corridor. Centered between them, pitched high on the lifted, almost upended, perspective plane, are two officials in dark suits and, behind them, two guards dressed in blue-white uniforms and pith helmets. The prisoners' figures shrink away into patchy, indeterminate faces and physiognomies; their flesh seems to melt inside the sketchy, rumpled clothes. Each one is distinct, however, even the most ill-defined in the high "deep" surface, and yet all remain irresolute in the slouching drawing and the streaked macchia striping of their outfits. The two guards are lanterns that shed only a small pool of light over the dark-clad officials. Signorini blocks out the scene in a way that might lead to sentimental irony or ideological scheme. But he does not allow content to determine style—the Macchiaioli were given to a sometimes gluey pathos—or style to reduce content to a mannered pattern. Signorini presents degradation, authority, the uniformities common to the different stations or degrees of freedom, and the appearance of community jangled by the essential solitude of personality, with the same impassioned clarity that he brought to his asylum picture, because he is painting *through* the documentary contents to find an emotional verity.

Broude's description of the prison and madhouse pictures, along with the stunning brothel interior *Morning Toilette* (1898), as among Signorini's "very few but extraordinarily powerful essays into the realm of social realism," is accurate as a definition. But the pictures nearly slip the definition because the archival verisimilitude and content-dominance crucial to social realism are rattled by the formal doubt visible in all these pictures about the capacity of a realist form-language to copy nature of any kind.

Moreover, just as important as the social content are the emotions stirred in the artist by the actual forms as he works them toward realization of a vision of affliction, estrangement, and despair. In *Morning Toilette,* the prostitutes' skirts are edged with candied oranges and reds, like theatrical backlighting or margins of firelight, and Signorini compresses so severely the space in which the women and their visitors are arranged that the fictive depth, as in a late work of Degas's like *Fallen Jockey,* is only faintly gestural, and we feel depth suddenly as a frontal, complex immediacy, a mortal presence. Here and in his best work, again like Degas, Signorini crushes anecdote from the scene in order to achieve a concentrate of formal feeling.

As a young artist, Silvestro Lega studied in Florence with Luigi Massini, the leading exponent of Purist painting, which looked back with admiration to the Nazarenes' "primitive" treatment of Christian subjects and to the indigenous art of the Florentine quattrocento, especially to the crisp drawing and pious moods of Fra Angelico and Giotto. Lega was a textbook instance of the artist skilled in the treatment of Biblical and classical themes who, in the charged political and artistic climate of the late 1850s, converted to macchia realism. Broude writes that the military events of 1859, when allied Piedmontese and French forces expelled the Austrians finally from Lombardy, provided Lega and other painters with "a new and patriotic incentive for turning to real life for both thematic and visual inspiration." As Signorini was beginning to apply the



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macchia to a realism of denser contents, Lega himself was saying that "a work which is not done from nature . . . cannot be good." Lega's best work took as its subject the domestic arrangements of women, especially in the serene country villas of the commercial middle class whose economic and social stability was being affected by the general unrest during the Risorgimento. During the 1860s Lega was a frequent guest at the Batelli estate at Piagentina in the Tuscan countryside, a haven for several first-generation Macchiaioli, and it was here that he painted many of his best works. (He had already executed in 1860 a series of military scenes which secured him a place among the politically restive artists of the Caffè Michelangiolo.) In the ritualized household activities of life at Piagentina memorialized in Lega's paintings, we do not see the formal restlessness so evident in Signorini's work. If the erotic force of Signorini's art is felt in his compulsive, enthusiastic, kneading response to material reality, the eros in Lega's is worked out in the way matter is illuminated. Of all the Macchiaioli, he is light's voluptuary. When he paints a woman by a window, staring out a chink in drawn sea-green shutters, he lights the scene so that the sunshine filling that chink washes down the entire front of her demure figure. It's an image of curiosity summoned by its object, real or imagined. The figure is claimed by that light, while the darkened interior is her sanctuary.

His most famous painting is *The Pergola* (1868) in the Brera. A serving girl is bringing coffee in late afternoon—the original title was *Dopo Pranzo* (*After Lunch*)—to a group of women. It's a country setting, and half the canvas space is occupied with tall grass, arable fields, and cypresses, as if to establish the picture's *plein air* pedigree. As in his other figure groups, the critical relations in *The Pergola* are worked out in the refinements of chiaroscuro. The three women of the villa household are clustered inside the recess of the pergola on the left side of the canvas. To the right, across the vertical divider made by one of the arbor poles, the servant approaches. They are seated, in shade; she is walking, the lowering sun at her back. Their shadows are confused with the larval shadows of the latticework; hers spears across the ground, running nearly the entire width of the picture. Lega was not interested in analyzing the social hierarchy or petty bourgeois habits of his very generous hosts. Nor are his pictures, as some writers have said, idealizations of villa life, of gentry culture then on the wane, though the generally sedate treatment of the subject in *The Pergola* at first gives it the appearance of a precious, harmonious moment preserved. In the hands of a great realist like Courbet, whose work was still not very well known in Italy—Italian painters were generally ignorant, it seems, of the 1855 Pavilion du Réalisme—paint was handled in such a way that it bore a sense of instability, the instability of the concrete world whose material fastness and monumentality the painter sought to represent. A painting's materiality was itself bound up in its aspiration to copy the look of matter. For nearly a century thereafter the *effort* to represent a simple fact of nature became more and more a primary artistic subject. Giacometti once remarked: "Cézanne discovered that it's impossible to copy nature. You can't do it. But one must try all the same. Try—like Cézanne—to translate one's sensation."

Lega was no disruptive interrogator of material reality like Courbet, and he was no radical destabilizer of forms like Cézanne, but in *The Pergola* he avoids the predetermined (and therefore sentimentalized) emotion dictated by the social "paradigm" the scene depicts. The picture is charged with a fragile and rather remote melancholy that makes it not so much an image of social exclusions but rather one of self-containments and privacies. The melancholy itself is ritualized. The idleness of the young women looks very much like torpor; the child in the group looks as listless as they, just as much resigned to a life of waiting. The serving girl is not set in opposition to them, but she is zoned apart in a concentration or resolve not visible to the others, though even this seems wearied by habit. She dominates the com-



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position in a sly way: though her figure is drawn no more prominently, and her isolation is neither heroized nor made pathetic, the way her shadow dominates the picture and underscores the group makes her identity more subtly assertive. She is finally the only one who seems to possess an articulated personality. Politically, Lega was a confirmed Republican whose deathbed portrait of the fiery reformer Mazzini is a passionate elegy to the radical force in Risorgimento politics. He was sympathetic to the peasant class and his paintings of peasant women were, in contrast to the maudlin renderings of other Macchiaioli, fairly realistic and disciplined.

We can see Lega and Signorini more sharply, perhaps, in contrast to a painter like Zandomeneghi, who trained at Venice's Accademia di Belle Arti in the late 1850s, was closely associated with the Macchiaioli, then went on to settle in Paris in 1874 and exhibit at the Impressionist shows there in the late 1870s. In his 1873 *Beggars on the Steps of the Convent of the Aracoeli,* a sexton is ladling out soup to the poor. Mothers and children are scattered around the steps. Each figure is so meticulously posed—one lifts a plate to her mouth, another spoon-feeds a child, another scoops the last drops from a tilted cup—that the moral tension of the scene is dissipated in the overripe poignance of the details. The scene is purposive with a vengeance and is sentimental because it allows no competing response to that of sheer pity —sentimentality in art is a form of moral tyranny—and, in formal terms, seals off the event in the righteousness of anecdote. The bad social condition is not discovered in the formal inflections and interrogations of the artist, it is *deposited* there. In this instance, the macchia does not draw realism into its proper auroral wakefulness; it numbs all alertness to possibility in the interest of correctly plaintive sentiment. This sort of emotional claustrophobia was not uncommon among the lesser Macchiaioli, and by contrast Lega's use of the macchia opened anecdotal realist space to more complex, ambiguous, and unplanned feelings.

Of the hundreds of paintings of women the Macchiaioli produced, only a few were nudes, and these were mostly by Vito D'Ancona. An 1873 nude by him in the Gallery of Modern Art in Milan shows some of the residual excitement of the classic macchia in its phasing of shadow over the body and bedsheets, but the pose and handling of flesh tones are academic and derivative of Ingres. The Macchiaioli painted images of chagrined or coquettish modesty with sympathetic gusto, but elemental flesh—flesh as vulnerable, changeful, conscious but thoughtless materiality, host of desire, myth, dream—did not interest them as much as the body defined by custom and circumstance. They wanted to represent destiny by fixing human presence in circumstantial contexts, in the somber chamber interludes of villa life, the toil of field workers or brush gatherers or charcoal burners, and the tumult of herdsmen driving sheep or cattle to market. All this reflected in part the Risorgimento passion for national destiny, but it also spoke for the Macchiaioli's intent to document the organizations of contemporary life. And contemporary life, as I've said, included peasant cultures recognizable from the *Georgics.* One of Italian realism's great ambitions was to establish the ancient and modern as part of the same material continuum. The debasement of it was the reduction of subject matter to the pathos of local color or to formal nicety. The paintings Cristiano Banti did of peasant life, for instance, are exemplary of the many softened, tame reports produced by macchia realists in the late nineteenth century. Banti lights his scenes for brooding pastoral effect. His countrywomen are posed for their noble weariness, not wretched fatigue. In Odoardo Borrani's 1880 painting *The Stonebreaker* all the exertion of hard labor has been refined out of the portrayal; the laborer looks like a large playful child smashing stones with a mallet. These later artists drew on the example of Courbet, Millet, and Breton, but they lacked the gravity and violence of the French painters. And one seldom feels in macchia realism the material



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resistance of paint which in Courbet makes his own activity a complicit heroic action. The lesser Macchiaioli were content to represent reality as mood, not as material fatefulness or sensationalist encounter.

The Macchiaiolo who steadfastly refused the seductions of mood and local color was Giovanni Fattori. Around 1866, when he painted the *Rotonda di Palmieri,* he produced two related panels, *Woman in Sunlight* and *Woman Outdoors,* both featuring a woman with a parasol. The macchia's sketchy simplicity of means is put to splendidly rough, half-definitive effect. The stressed, pulpy colors of *Woman Outdoors* mineralize the light. In *Woman in Sunlight* the color is so thinned out that it looks drizzly, scored through by the textures of the support. The handling of color volumes in these little pieces reveals an imagination that feels the obduracy and the evanescence of material being as one story.

In addition to being the most prolific of the Macchiaioli, Fattori was also the most outspoken in declaring himself a realist. In 1903, he described realism as "the accurate study of contemporary society" with the intention "to reveal the evils with which [society] is afflicted . . . [and] to convey to posterity our customs and habits." His genius was a compound of the fleet, light-registering impulses of the macchia and a socially responsive archival realism. Inevitably, especially in the large military paintings, his pictures so scrupulously preserved historical anecdote that they sometimes remained formally inert or mechanical. But in his best work, when that compound is realized, he created pictorial space not by copying and miniaturizing depth and volume but by laying these across the picture plane in a way that folded contents in strange, uncanny ways.

Curiously, it's in the military scenes where this sometimes happens most powerfully. The soldiers whose backs are turned toward us in *French Soldiers of '59* are anonymous pictorial legends; moment to moment the figures shed their representational force and are only interesting blots of impacted paint. In the large busy canvas *The Wounded Prince Amadeo* (1870), outside the cluster of worried attention shown by officers toward their wounded leader, three foot soldiers lie dead, cordoned off by a row of trees that mark the margin of life, a circle drawn around the dead nature of those ignored fallen soldiers. Space in these pictures is a critical bearer of feeling, distended or contracted in ways that bring it right to the threshold of modernist space, that theatrical setting for the self-aware manipulations of perception and sensation. I do not mean to suggest that Fattori precipitated the crisis in representation formulated by Cézanne and Giacometti, but that his art, in service to realist scruples, contributed unmistakably to the dissolution of conventional realist volume and space. At the same time, he did not go so far as the Impressionists and turn representation inside out. I think Fattori's assertions late in life were so bitterly put because he sensed he was at the end of something. In 1891 he attacked what he felt to be the sterility of divisionist painting. In 1902, still living in genteel poverty despite his great local fame, Fattori gave lessons in life drawing in Florence, where one of his most gifted students was Modigliani, who a few years later took off for Paris.

Of all the military paintings, *Man Caught in a Stirrup* (1880-82) is the most disturbing and technically robust. A lifeless soldier is being dragged face down behind his spooked horse. Fattori buckles the depth of the scene so radically that the horse, galloping up a road away from us, seems pitched beyond and above the soldier. We see first the soldier; his spread arms pull our attention to the long clawed tracks his hands have cut in the dirt; then we take in the horse, a dark ganglion of force. Because of the severely contracted space, the beast seems to be plunging into the canvas, as if sucked back into the vortex of the imaginary perspective point. The elements Fattori marshals to create this gruesome pictorial torque—the runaway violence, the useless restraining gesture of the dead cavalryman, the road



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that has the felt allegorical presence of the ground of existence—all are displayed across the canvas with a mysteriously poised, almost decorative, suspension.

In moving toward my own understanding and evaluation of Macchiaioli art, my guidestar from another constellation has been Degas. Their differences notwithstanding —the Macchiaioli, for instance, never drifted far from their *plein air*ist origins, whereas Degas was the supreme urban artist, fascinated not only by commercial life but also by cultural institutions like opera, ballet, and theater—they and he felt compelled to get down the facts of their time and place, and they experimented with color volumes to represent material reality. Degas was the greatest of them because he brought to a higher, more daring resolution the possibilities of color, investigated more completely the sensations stirred by concrete images, concrete facts, and was passionate enough to question and dismantle his own resolutions. In *Fallen Jockey,* the spectral and material, the purely formalist and the realistic, fuse in an image which is extremely unsettling because the drama of fused, collapsing plastic forms lived out by the artist on that surface is one with the picture's simple representation of accident and mortality.

While the Macchiaioli were good draftsmen and often superb colorists, with only a few exceptions they did not kick loose the scaffolding of conventionally affecting social representation. And none of them, not even Fattori, had the almost deranged willfulness of imagination that could result in things like Degas's late pastel and charcoal bathers or his essence sketches of ballerinas, which are *about* the effort to coax form from oblivion, to show the protogenetic form-life of blankness. In Degas's work there is often a cruelty, or at least a chilled, calculated disinterest, inseparable from formal curiosity, from image-making desire. This quality, like the coldness and "arrogant purpose" Greenberg attributed to Matisse, is surely one determining characteristic of modernist representation. Matisse certainly, but also Picasso and Giacometti, and even less turbulent artists like Balthus and Morandi, all possessed a devouring regard for subject matter and formal willfulness that none of the Macchiaioli could sustain for very long. As realists, the Macchiaioli did not so much consume their subjects as they shepherded and preserved them. Their formal response was not, as a rule, contentious and disputative and interrogatory. It was grounded in receptivity, accommodation, protectiveness, not in auroral vulnerability and appetite. If we can speak of Degas's love for his subjects, it was of a kind that challenged him to transfigure them, to give them over entirely into the exile of image-life. This extremity of love, hardly distinguishable from rage, the Macchiaioli did not possess with any such intensity.

The limitations and importance of macchia realism, set against the achievements of Degas (or, for that matter, Cézanne, whose career developed contemporaneously with Signorini's and Fattori's) are apparent in some of Fattori's portraits. His *Portrait of My Stepdaughter* (1889: the same year Degas did the Metropolitan's *Nude Woman Combing Her Hair* and Cézanne painted the Museum of Modern Art's *Boy in a Red Waistcoat*) shows a deft handling of color. The tonal range is austere: black hair, eyes, earrings, velvet choker, bracelet, and rings draw our attention top to bottom, interrupting the fluid ivory fields of the woman's dress and flesh. A small red globe on a Japanese fan in her hand is the one titillation amidst all that pristine candor. In her expression Fattori preserves a blend of youthful dreaminess and patient regard for the act of portraiture. She is coyly aware of her role, and evidently uninterested in it. Fattori seems intent on characterizing the familiar and professional relation. A few years later Cézanne would be telling visitors that in portraiture the hardest but most important thing to paint was the *distance* between himself and the sitter. That reveals a significant difference between late Italian realism and modernist representation. Fattori gives those quivering fields and fabric



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and skin a startling presence, so that we feel not only the little drama of circumstance but also the force of incarnation. He does not challenge the imaging of incarnation as Degas and Cézanne were already doing. That same year he painted a charming portrait of his wife in which the suggestion of beguiled incredulity about the act of portraiture is almost wickedly expressed in the woman's toothy half-grin. Fattori releases into the picture a quality of relation which preceded and will presumably continue beyond it. The determinant forces in both pictures are anecdotal affections, not the compulsions of "research." For all their fine execution and insinuating feelings, they do not bear any trace of the transfigurative enthusiasm that was already becoming an actual part of the new representationalism. Cézanne, and soon Picasso and Matisse, were to look for a different kind of god in nature, a god revealed in images of disincarnation.

There was an enormous quantity of Macchiaioli painting produced from 1855 to 1900. If you look at enough of the work you begin to feel in much of it a conventionalized diffidence. At its most banal it announces a self-satisfied suggestiveness and atrophied curiosity which are the signs of provincial art. After viewing several rooms in the Pitti stuffed with similarly achieved effects—the scenes of peasant life, especially the softened renderings of peasant women, are particularly cloying—most of us will have seen enough. Signorini, Lega, and Fattori are important first of all because they painted more than a few exceptional pictures. But they also, more than other Macchiaioli, urged realist painting beyond the provincial circumspections of the macchia. And incidentally their work helps us to see more clearly the career of modern Italian painting, not only the speedy self-exaltations of Futurism, which turned violently against the cultivated modesties and "nice" Italy of much Macchiaioli painting, but also the monastic rigor and obsessive modesties of Giorgio Morandi.



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# A proliferation of Rabbits

## *by Bruce Bawer*

*"—and you're so damn adolescent. There's more things in the world than who's boffing who."*
—Nelson Angstrom to his father, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, in *Rabbit at Rest*

When, in 1960, a promising twenty-eight-year-old writer named John Updike published his second novel, *Rabbit, Run*, nobody—not even the young author himself—had any idea that it would turn out to be the first installment of a tetralogy, or that thirty years would pass before the last volume, the newly issued *Rabbit at Rest*, finally appeared.[1] According to a recent essay by Updike in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Rabbit, Run*—with its tale of a former high-school basketball star who finds adult life less rewarding than his glory days on the court—was contrived principally for the purpose of exemplifying what Updike calls the "rabbit approach" to life, "spontaneous, unreflective, frightened," and was designed in conjunction with his third novel, *The Centaur* (1963), which depicts the "horse method of coping with life, to get into harness and pull your load until you drop." Though Updike set *Rabbit, Run* in his home state of Pennsylvania, his twenty-six-year-old protagonist, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, is no self-portrait but something of an alternative self, an Updike, as it were, whose talents are physical rather than artistic, who has stayed in Pennsylvania instead of moving to New England, and who, in his mid-twenties, is not a successful and resolute young man who has found his vocation but a weak-willed failure who doesn't know what to do with his life.

As the novel opens, Harry is living in his hometown of Mt. Judge, a suburb of Brewer, the "fifth largest city in Pennsylvania." Both professionally and personally, things are looking down for this sometime sports hero: he's a door-to-door potato-peeler salesman with no career prospects, and Janice, his pregnant wife (and the mother of his infant son, Nelson), is an unaffectionate, dipsomaniacal mess. Oppressed by the burdens of his life and grieved by its lack of rapture, Harry runs away from home. On an impulse, he drives to West Virginia, then back; then, through his old high-school coach, he meets a prostitute named Ruth Leonard, whose affection he wins and whose flat he moves into. Jack Eccles, a young Episcopal priest from his in-laws' church (Harry's a Lutheran), urges him to go home; but though he does return when Janice gives birth to a daughter, she throws his dalliance with Ruth up at him and he walks out again. Soon afterward, when an inebriated Janice accidentally drowns the little girl in the bathtub, Harry shows up at the funeral, offhandedly forgiving ("Hey, it's O.K. . . . You didn't mean to") and ready to give the mar-

1 *Rabbit at Rest*, by John Updike; Knopf, 512 pages, $21.95. The other Rabbit books are available in paperback from Fawcett.



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riage another chance; but Janice turns away coldly, and Harry goes back to Ruth, who, now pregnant and resentful over his abandonment of her, rages at him about his vacillation and undependability. "All I know is what feels right," he responds by way of explanation, to which she counters: "Who cares *what* you feel?" Harry, unable to decide whether to throw in his lot with Janice or Ruth, simply runs.

*Rabbit, Run* is impressive in many ways. Tense, taut, and suggestive, it is a fine example of that demanding genre, the acute, fluent study of a not very acute or fluent protagonist. What is particularly notable is that Updike, inspired by Joyce Cary's marvelous *Mister Johnson*, wrote the novel—as he would write all three of its successors—in the present tense, at the time rarely employed in American fiction. (The Rabbit books are largely responsible, of course, for its frequent use today.) Despite the congenital drawbacks of the present tense (which are manifested to a relatively minor degree in *Rabbit, Run*, but which I will elaborate upon in connection with *Rabbit at Rest*), it does lend the book a sense of movement and urgency, and captures something of Rabbit's own existential sensibility. And what a crippling sensibility it is: for while his brief tenure as a local athletic hero endowed him with inflated expectations of life, he has never learned to articulate, tame, or act constructively upon these expectations, never progressed beyond the reflexive, moment-to-moment approach that works better on the high-school basketball court than on the field of life, never recognized that what adulthood requires of him is self-discipline and intelligent decision-making, not fleetness of foot. Yet Updike wants us to *like* Harry, to sympathize with him and care passionately about his fate, and even to see a religious significance in his personal waverings. This is why Updike gives him an opportunity to debate theology with Eccles, whose views of the deity he doesn't share. While the priest believes that "God rules reality," Harry's sense of things is that living in the world entails "separation from God"; he feels that "somewhere behind all this . . . there's something that wants me to find it," a sentiment that prompts Eccles to call him a "mystic" and to explain that "Christianity isn't looking for a rainbow. . . . We're trying to *serve* God, not *be* God."

The novel's epigraph is from Pascal—"The motions of Grace, the hardness of the heart; external circumstances"—and Updike, like Pascal, is fascinated by the nexus between matter and spirit, between the mundane and the sublime. The epigraph to *The Centaur*, which is drawn from the theologian Karl Barth (a major influence on Updike's thinking), is relevant here: "Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth." Plainly, Harry is meant to be seen as torn between heaven and earth, drawn upward by a quasi-mystical straining after grace and downward by his worldly obligations. But Updike behaves as if these two things are mutually exclusive, as if spiritual fulfillment cannot be derived from the performance of selfless acts, as if selfishness is the surest route to spiritual intensity. (Indeed, it is only when Harry takes care of his baby daughter that *Rabbit, Run* seems to reflect an awareness that doing something for another person might actually be as soul-enhancing as doing something for oneself.) The plain truth about Harry, notwithstanding the sympathy he evokes now and then, is that most of his actions come across as symptoms not of quasi-mystical temperament but of shallowness of character. "[I]s he a good man?" Updike asks in a note to a 1977 limited edition of the novel. "The question is meant to lead to another—what is goodness?" Updike explains that when he wrote *Rabbit, Run*,

> Kerouac's *On the Road* was in the air, and a decade of dropping-out about to arrive, and the price society pays for unrestrained motion was on my mind. In the end, the act of running, of gathering a blank momentum "out of a kind of sweet panic," offers itself as containing a kernel of goodness; but perhaps a stone or



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> a flower at rest holds the same kernel. At any rate, the title is a piece of advice, in the imperative mode, though the man giving it was sitting at a desk, in the upstairs room of a seventeenth-century house, overlooking a shady street corner in a small New England town.

At the end of the note, he says that "the Rabbit in us all remains both wild and timid, harmful and loving, hard-hearted and open to the motions of Grace."

This passage has a coy, narcissistic dodginess that is very Angstromish: Updike expresses a conservative-sounding concern about "the price society pays for unrestrained motion," then subversively asserts the "goodness" of Harry's running away, then hedges by suggesting that maybe it's good only in the same way as a stone or flower (?), then tells us that "the title is a piece of advice"—that, in other words, he *likes* the idea of Harry running. More to the point, however, is the peculiarity of Updike's notion that *Rabbit, Run* constitutes a study in the nature of goodness, and his implication that it is through the most Angstromlike corners of our souls that the rest of us are most "open to the motions of Grace"—an implication that would seem to reflect a surprisingly blinkered moral perspective, or (at the very least) an idiosyncratic understanding of the meaning of the words *goodness* and *grace*. Confronted with Updike's gloss on *Rabbit, Run*, a reader may be forgiven for having his own question, namely: in a world full of more virtuous, bright, interesting, and industrious men and women, why should anyone be concerned enough about this idle, self-obsessed, tiresome, and mediocre man—whose own concern for those around him is (at best) inconstant—to read four books about him? Quite simply, Harry's chief flaw as a human being is that he has never learned to care about anyone else as much as he cares about himself; by the same token, a major shortcoming of *Rabbit, Run* is that Updike, who considers himself to be interested in the question of goodness, is at once too tolerant of Harry's solipsism and too inattentive to its repercussions in the lives of those around him. This is true, alas, not only of *Rabbit, Run* but of all the Rabbit novels.

When Harry does approach spiritual fulfillment in the company of another person, the encounter is likely to center upon sex. Updike is, needless to say, notorious for his erotic passages, which have been widely praised for their combination of the clinical and the transcendent. The problem with them, however, is that they tend to jump directly from the clinical to the transcendent, largely bypassing the human. To put it a bit differently, Harry is inclined to regard a sexual partner more as an orgasm machine and a vessel of grace than as a person, deriving little or none of his joy in the liaison from a profound interest in her as an individual; Updike's perspective on these coital episodes, moreover, is not significantly removed from Harry's. A critic has suggested that "we must grant Updike his obsession" with sex; and one would hardly want to deny a novelist his obsessions. But a reader has a right, I think, to expect an author to bring some perspective to bear on those obsessions, and to manipulate them in such a way as to illuminate the human condition—especially when he makes it clear, as Updike does in the sex scenes of the Rabbit books, that those obsessions lie, for him, at the heart of the matter.

*Rabbit, Run* has other failings. The set-up is excessively schematic: Eccles is too patently a mouthpiece for organized Christianity's slant on things, and the contrast between the dense, wan, unstable Janice and the smart, robust, sturdy Ruth is implausibly tidy. What's more, Ruth—who is not bitter and cynical about sex but generous and good-natured—strikes one as a romantic's idea of a whore. For all this, however, *Rabbit, Run* is a compelling, meticulously fashioned novel that explores serious spiritual questions and exhibits a real appreciation for the power of the unspoken, the reality of mystery. Though one may not agree entirely with Updike's metaphysics, the book renders its vision forcefully, even (at times) affectingly.



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The same, I'm afraid, cannot be said of the longer, slacker *Rabbit Redux* (1971). In his *Times* piece, Updike says that he wrote it partly because he owed his publishers a novel and partly because "it seemed to me that Rabbit Angstrom . . . might be the vehicle in which to package some of the American unease that was raging all around us." The word *package* strikes the right note, for *Rabbit Redux* comes across less as a novel about the way people really lived and thought during the late Sixties than as an assemblage of images, arguments, and character types drawn from the newspaper headlines of that period. Set in 1969, the book finds Harry living with Janice and working as a typesetter at a Brewer printing plant. He is, plainly, a solid enough citizen; but when Janice abandons him and Nelson (who's now thirteen) and moves in with Charlie Stavros, a salesman at her father's used-car lot whom she has been seeing on the sly, Harry loses control. He takes as his concubine a rich, radical teenage runaway named Jill; she, in turn, brings into the house a violent black fugitive named Skeeter, who hates America and the white race and imagines himself to be a messiah. Both Skeeter and Jill consider Harry an ignorant bigot (which he is), and he considers them, respectively, deranged and spoiled (right on both counts); but all three, for whatever reason, are willing to talk politics together, and so much of the book consists of this unlikely threesome's implausible conversations about race, revolution, and the ruling classes. Since there is little here in the way of plot, Updike wraps the whole thing up by having Jill perish in a fire, set (apparently) by a neighbor distressed at Skeeter's presence in Harry's house.

We are doubtless supposed to view the Harry of *Rabbit Redux* as a desperate, conflicted man, torn between his responsibilities as patriot, wage earner, and family man and his long-suppressed yearning—now reawakened by Janice's departure and the advent of Jill and Skeeter—to break loose and seek the "something out there" that he feels calling to him. But it doesn't wash. Skeeter, for one thing, is a preposterous creation, coming off less as a human being than as a grotesque incarnation of late-Sixties black anger at its most irrational and paranoid; he is difficult to buy on anything other than a strictly symbolic level. Nor is Harry's fascination with him credible. Of course, we're meant to recognize that Harry sees in Skeeter glimpses of the runaway "mystic" he once was, and that part of him is drawn to Skeeter even as part (the levelheaded householder) is repelled. But the two parts don't fit together convincingly; Harry sounds like Archie Bunker one minute and Abbie Hoffman the next. And it's hard to believe that even Harry, irresponsible as he is, would let this sociopath stay under the same roof as his son, let alone that he would sit still for Skeeter's lessons in Marxism. Likewise, we're evidently supposed to recognize that Harry's attraction to Jill, who is young enough to be his child, is largely rooted in the loss of his baby daughter in *Rabbit, Run*; but virtually everything about Jill—who appears almost out of nowhere, the very embodiment of youth, wealth, beauty, and free love, and who readily services Harry's often kinky carnal appetite—reads like something out of an adolescent fantasy. (One might also add that it's hard to believe a middle-class American homeowner in 1969 would set fire to a house down the block from his own in order to drive an undesirable from the neighborhood.)

To be sure, the novel has a spiritual element. The conflict between Harry's support of America's Vietnam policy and his adversaries' Marxist utopianism seems designed to enact a Barthian tension between earth and heaven. But politics rules the day here; and the moral ambiguity of *Rabbit, Run* deteriorates in this book, with the movement of politics to center stage, into an offensive moral indeterminacy, a refusal to advance beyond dialectic. Equally offensive is the sex, which is more obtrusive, empty, and exploitative than in *Rabbit, Run*. Throughout the book, the characters play musical beds: aside from Harry's coital encounters with Jill and Janice's with Charlie, there's Harry's with



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Peggy (a friend of Janice's), Skeeter's with Jill, and Charlie's with Mim (Harry's sister); it is also hinted for a time that perhaps even Nelson and Jill are sleeping together. In addition, Harry thinks endlessly about sex, and those thoughts can be pretty bizarre. At one point, for instance, he tries to picture Charlie and Mim together, and we are vouchsafed a graphic description of both characters' genitalia as he envisions them, and an elaborate account of their imagined coupling; at another point, we are offered a detailed description of Harry's fantasy of bedding down "a hefty coarse Negress, fat but not sloppy fat, muscular and masculine, with a trace of a mustache and a chipped front tooth."

All these pairings, real and imaginary, are rendered by Updike with what can only be described as lusty enthusiasm. The idea here is plainly that sex, to Harry, is the preeminent means of establishing meaningful contact with other people, and that his fantasy, say, about intercourse with a black woman may well be seen as embodying a longing to bridge the American racial gap. Yet these sex scenes have little real human content or dramatic purport, and it is not long before they grow monotonous and redundant—and not long, either, before Updike's apparent conviction that they embody moments of transcendence comes to seem not only puerile but repugnant.

In *Rabbit Redux* Updike attempts to capture the distinct tenor of the Sixties; in *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) he seeks to do the same for the more amorphous Seventies. Since, when he came to write the book, America happened to be in the grip of the 1979 gasoline crunch, Updike took as his theme the idea that the country, in the Seventies, was "running out of gas." These are, in Harry's words, the "bad new days": America can't produce anymore, the Japanese have shown us up, our nation's young people are spoiled and lazy and dependent. In his *Times* piece, curiously enough, Updike all but acknowledges the artificiality of the socioeconomic motif of *Rabbit Is Rich*, noting that, despite the "running out of gas" theme, he was "feeling pretty good" when he wrote the novel and so it turned out to be "kind of an upbeat book in spite of itself." And it is upbeat, if only in comparison with its predecessors: there are no babies drowning in bathtubs, no teenage girls perishing in house fires. What's more, though not quite "rich," Harry and Janice (who have been back together for years) are decidedly well-off: her father having died, the family used-car lot has passed into the hands of Janice and her mother, and is now (what else?) a lucrative Toyota franchise with Harry as its manager.

The catalytic acts in the first two Rabbit novels are, respectively, Harry's abandonment of Janice and Janice's abandonment of Harry; in *Rabbit Is Rich*, the catalytic act is a homecoming—namely, the twenty-three-year-old Nelson's return home from college (he attends Kent State, naturally) with a friend named Melanie. Harry assumes that she is Nelson's girlfriend, but soon afterward her place is taken by a pregnant young lady named Pru, whom Nelson introduces as his fiancée. Nelson announces his intention to quit school and work at the lot, and suggests that Harry make room for him by firing Charlie. Though Harry, who has become good friends with Charlie, balks at the suggestion, Janice sides with Nelson, and eventually Charlie is squeezed out. Nelson proceeds to screw up at the lot, though not disastrously, and after marrying Pru—who gives birth to a baby girl—and briefly running away from home (like father, like son), he decides to return to college, making it possible for Charlie, who has in the meantime had a pleasant affair with Melanie, to get his old job back. At the end of the book we find Harry and Janice, content as they ever have been, moving into a new house in the upscale neighborhood of Penn Park. All in all, compared to the earlier Rabbit novels, *Rabbit Is Rich* is a veritable Midsummer Night's Dream.

In no respect is this difference more pronounced than in regard to sex. Compared to the extramarital hijinks in the earlier Rabbit



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novels, the playing around in *Rabbit Is Rich* is relatively guilt-free and out in the open; Janice's affair with Charlie is a fact of history that nobody feels uncomfortable about anymore, and sexual fidelity is so little an issue between Harry and Janice that, when they vacation in the Caribbean with two other couples, they engage readily in spouse-swapping and talk uninhibitedly about it afterward. To be sure, Harry assumes during most of the novel that he will never again sleep with anyone but Janice; when, in the Caribbean, he finds himself in bed with Thelma, the wife of his high-school teammate (and nemesis) Ronnie Harrison, and learns to his astonishment that she is very much in love with him and willing to do anything for him, Updike wants us to see their night together as revitalizing, epiphanic. If he is more successful at this here than elsewhere, it is because there is more than the usual degree of real affection involved—at least on Thelma's part (her declaration of her love for Harry is genuinely convincing, even touching)—and less than the usual degree of selfishness (the liaison, sanctioned by Janice and Ronnie, doesn't appear to be hurting anybody).

Having had one attractive young woman under his roof in *Rabbit Redux*, Harry now has two, Melanie and Pru, both of whom are at once daughter figures and objects of desire. And there is yet another daughter figure: toward the end of the book, he tracks down Ruth, his hooker girlfriend from *Rabbit, Run*, who refuses to give a clear answer when he asks whether her college-age daughter is his. While in *Rabbit Redux*, moreover, Harry's special bond with Skeeter seems to derive strength from their mutual involvement with Jill, in *Rabbit Is Rich* his sense of closeness to Charlie is founded, in some way, upon the latter's affair with Janice a decade earlier. What's Updike's point here? It's as if he's trying to say that women serve as physical-spiritual conduits of a sort between men, as instruments of male bonding, as territories for them to fight over and as the fields of battle on which they fight. ("I'm tired of you and Nelson fighting your old wars through me," Janice complains to Harry in *Rabbit at Rest.*) Not that this earns women any recognition as human beings: if anything, Harry (who in all four books routinely refers to Janice as a "mutt") is more callous here than ever about women, habitually reducing them to their sex organs. "She does know something," he muses darkly about Janice when he realizes she has no loyalty to Charlie. "All cunts know something." Here, as in *Rabbit Redux*, women are seen as mysterious, fickle creatures, never to be fully known or understood, whose worth is measured at least in part by their attractiveness to other men. Pondering Janice's affair with Charlie, Harry reflects: "A man fucks your wife, it puts a new value on her, within limits."

Paradoxically, the Harry of *Rabbit Is Rich* is at once more likeable and more obnoxious than ever. Or maybe he just *seems* more likeable, partly because Nelson is now too old for Harry's incompetence as a parent to count very strongly against him, and partly because the boy has grown up to be so egocentric, whiny, unreliable, and self-pitying that Harry now looks almost like Albert Schweitzer by comparison. Nelson is, indeed, so unbearable that he comes across less like a character in a book than like the image that someone griping in a barroom might give you of his ingrate son. As Eliot Fremont-Smith wrote in a review of the novel, Nelson "seems more programmed by Updike's loyalty to Rabbit than by Rabbit's genes or will." Yet Updike's loyalty doesn't keep Harry from being remarkably obnoxious, too. Consider this: "It gives him pleasure, makes Rabbit feel rich, to contemplate the world's wasting, to know that the earth is mortal too." And this, at his father-in-law's funeral: "The great thing about the dead, they make space." Throughout *Rabbit Is Rich*, Updike fails to distance himself sufficiently from such observations, fails to make it clear to us why such an odious character should merit our interest and empathy.

Yet Harry is at least consistent in his odiousness. Unlike the Harry of *Rabbit Re-*



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*dux*, he is someone that a reader can imagine running across in a medium-sized Pennsylvania city. His opinions line up, his voice rings true, and the shape and rhythm of his days strike one as authentic. From the opening pages, which find him lollygagging around the showroom, raking over the coals of his life and shooting the breeze with Charlie about the state of the nation and of the car business, it is clear that Updike has managed, this time, to depict a real-seeming middle-class American, and to incorporate current events into the story of his life without outraging one's sense of reality. Updike even does the impossible in this book—he makes Harry Angstrom *interesting* (and, every now and then, quite funny). The novel is longer and looser than its predecessors, but it is also richer, fuller. It is appropriate that one of its two epigraphs is a description of the "Ideal Citizen" as envisioned by Sinclair Lewis's George Babbitt, for this, more than any of the other Rabbit books, effectively captures, as Lewis sought to do in *Babbitt*, something of the life of an ordinary middle-American man at home, at work, and at play. If, in short, *Rabbit Is Rich* is a considerably better novel than *Rabbit Redux*, it is because the story is much more credible and well-constructed, the characters less given to longwinded and dubious political disputation, and Harry a more integrated and engaging presence.

As its title may suggest, *Rabbit at Rest* lacks the energy of *Rabbit Is Rich*. Set in 1989, it finds Harry semi-retired from the Toyota lot; in addition to their fancy Penn Park digs, he and Janice have a house in the Poconos and a condo on the Gulf Coast of Florida, where they spend six months every year. They live a quiet life, and seem reasonably content. But their peace and prosperity are threatened when they learn that Nelson, who now runs the Toyota franchise, has been embezzling money to support a cocaine habit and to buy medicine for an employee with AIDS. Though Nelson eventually agrees to enter an addiction-treatment program and Harry acts quickly to straighten things out, the Toyota company withdraws its franchise, and its representative, in an episode all too plainly intended to symbolize the nature of late-1980s relations between the United States and Japan, makes some cutting remarks about the "rack of disciprine in people of America," about Nelson's immaturity and about Harry's inept parenting. As if this weren't bad enough, Harry has serious health problems: he suffers a heart attack, after which he submits to an angioplasty but vetoes a recommended bypass. (When the doctor accuses him of toying with his life, Harry asks himself: *"what's life for but to toy with?"*)

Once he has inflicted these tribulations upon the Angstrom family, Updike proceeds to arrange things so that Harry and Pru are left alone together one evening. No reader of the previous Rabbit books should be surprised to learn that the two of them, drained and demoralized by these family crises, end up in the sack. Some time later, when Janice finds out, Harry can't see why she's so upset: "Whajou put me and her in the same house at night for? Whajou think I was, dead already?" Even after following him through four novels and thirty years, one doesn't know quite what to make of this comeback. Is Harry joking nervously because he doesn't know what else to say? Or is he serious? Are we truly expected to believe that Harry has grown up so little that he *could* seriously say something like this? The episode with Pru constitutes the book's climax, but it's an ill-conceived one, which, aside from striking a reader as highly implausible, makes everything that has preceded it suddenly seem like the laboriously contrived opening sequences of a pornographic movie. Nor does it do much to enhance one's already meager sympathy for Harry, who, when asked by Pru whether we shouldn't "all be responsible for our own lives," responds: "Beats me . . . I never knew who was responsible for mine." How long, for heaven's sake, can one be expected to remain concerned about such a morally torpid being?

Nor is Harry the only torpid one here.



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*Rabbit at Rest* is the longest book in the series, not because Updike has more to say but because his prose is slacker, and his characters chattier, than ever. It's a surprisingly lazy book. Updike appears bored with the Angstroms, and doesn't seem well enough acquainted with the people they have become over the last decade; they sound too much alike, and say and do things that seem out of character. Would Nelson complain about "the greedy consumer society"? Would Janice, a *National Enquirer* reader, buy Harry a scholarly book about the Dutch role in the American Revolution? Even Harry seems out of focus. Early in the book we're told that "blaspheming . . . makes Harry uneasy." *Harry?* And would he actually use words like *seigneurial*? Or say "Might she ask?" instead of "You think she might ask?" Ever since *Rabbit Redux*, Harry has occasionally sounded less like the "spontaneous, unreflective, frightened" ex-jock of *Rabbit, Run* than like—well—a *New Yorker* writer; in *Rabbit at Rest* he sounds closer than ever to Updike.

Another reason for the excessive length of *Rabbit at Rest* is that it is rife with references (often quite extensive) to the sitcoms Harry watches and the news events he hears about on radio and TV. To be sure, all of the Rabbit books have contained such references: in *Rabbit, Run*, Janice watches "The Mickey Mouse Club" and Updike catalogues the pop songs, news flashes, and commercials that Harry hears on the car radio during his flight to West Virginia. But never has Updike included more such references than in the present book, and never have they seemed more arbitrary and self-indulgent. More than ever, it seems obvious that he is putting his own opinions about current events and TV programs into Harry's mouth; and it seems obvious, too, that the only reason Harry's response to a news story about Jim Bakker, say, appears on a given page is that Updike happened to have that page in the typewriter the day the Bakker story broke. (In his *Times* piece, Updike tells us that "[i]n writing, I several times had to stop to let real time catch up with my fictional time." Is this any way to write a novel?)

Updike's decision to work so many news stories into *Rabbit at Rest* may well have something to do with his newfound emphasis on history. Harry reads about the French and American revolutions, and is depressed by the thought of newfangled religious sects because "[a]t least the moldy old denominations have some history to them." It is a shame, in this connection, that the great event of the 1980s, the collapse of Communism, took place too late for Updike to make major thematic use of it; the subject comes up only glancingly near the end of the book, where Harry reflects that he misses the Cold War because "[i]t gave you a reason to get up in the morning." But then, what could Updike have done with so triumphant a news story? He prefers more horrific (if less historically consequential) tidings, such as the explosions of the *Challenger* and Pan Am Flight 103, the latter of which serves here as a symbol of Harry's—and, one gathers, America's— approaching end.

The proliferation of news stories and TV plots in *Rabbit at Rest* underlines a cardinal weakness of the present tense—namely, that since life does present itself as a clutter of events, and since only with the passage of time do the trivial things fall away, the important experiences separate out entirely from the inessential, and the shape and meaning of it all become more readily discernible, the present tense is a veritable invitation to an author not to direct emphasis sufficiently. Rather than struggle against this temptation in *Rabbit at Rest* (as he has done, to varying degrees, in its predecessors), Updike succumbs to it entirely, placing the deadly serious and the picayune side by side and according them similar emphasis. At one point, for instance, Harry meditates upon Watergate, China, Gorbachev, "that evil pockmarked Noriega," and the feud between Bryant Gumbel and Willard Scott on the "Today" show. When his doctor urges him to have a bypass, Harry thinks about Kelly McGillis in *Witness*. Indubitably, the purpose of such juxtapositions is to depict



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the way in which every mind wanders back and forth between the important and the inconsequential. But one soon grows tired of this device, which strikes one not only as something of a tic, but as a disinclination on Updike's part to make distinctions, to tell us what really matters.

*Rabbit at Rest* is the saddest of the Rabbit books. But then what can one expect of a novel about a fiftyish man who, thirty years ago, was already a backward-looking, woebegone has-been? Though Harry, after playing Uncle Sam in a Fourth of July parade, observes approvingly that America is "all in all . . . the happiest fucking country the world has ever seen," Updike acknowledges in his *Times* piece that this is "a depressed book about a depressed man, written by a depressed man." It is crowded with deaths and images of death: Janice's father has passed away; Thelma (with whom Harry has been conducting an affair for several years) is dying of lupus; in drought-ridden Florida, "even friendship has a thin, provisional quality, since people might at any minute buy another condominium and move to it, or else up and die."

More than any of its predecessors, moreover, the book seems oddly tilted against Janice and Nelson. Time and again, Harry finds himself at odds with both his wife and son, who take outrageous positions on the matter of Nelson's perfidy and find ways to blame Harry for it. Nelson won't even take responsibility for what he has done to the family business, and Janice, ignoring all evidence of his untrustworthiness, lets him remain in charge of the lot until it is too late. Emerging from therapy, Nelson spouts "AA bullshit"; Janice, for her part, speaks in jargon picked up in a so-called women's course. And both act blasé about Harry's health: when he checks into a Florida hospital, Nelson decides against canceling a flight back to Pennsylvania, and Janice announces that "there's an origami demonstration tonight at the Village I don't want to miss." It all reads like a black joke by Updike about the undevotion of wives and sons, and one cannot help but feeling that there is a personal explanation for it. Nelson's belligerence toward Harry also seems designed, in part, to contrast with the compassion of a young nurse in Harry's Pennsylvania hospital who proves to be Ruth's—and maybe Harry's—daughter. Updike plainly wants us to be touched by Harry's affection for this girl, and wants us to find pathos, perhaps even tragedy, in the fact that she never knows that he may be her father, and that he never finds out whether he is. But it's not particularly moving: one can think only that (a) if Harry had really cared about the girl he would have made more of an effort before now to track her down, and (b) the girl is, in any case, better off without Harry, who would probably have ended up taking her to bed.

Though *Rabbit at Rest* may not have the same emphasis on religion as *Rabbit, Run*, we are meant to understand that Harry retains his quasi-mystical strain (he declares that he's always identified with the Dalai Lama), and to admire him for—of all things!—his supposed faith in life, his eternally springing hope. As he tells Thelma, he can't believe that he won't ever fulfill his dreams (of which we've never heard before) of visiting Tibet and being a test pilot. (And yet, depressed at the "elderly sexiness" of "The Golden Girls," he reflects that "[p]eople ought to know when to give up.") Janice surprises him (and the reader) by saying that "you have to have faith. You've taught me that." Faith in what? "In us. In life." Updike would manifestly like to think that Harry has taught us that, too; but he continues to view faith as something that makes one run away rather than as something that strengthens one's resolve. (The endurance of his union with Janice strikes the reader as having less to do with Harry's faith in their marriage than with his fear and inertia.) The book is crowded with images of people as ordure, as refuse, as vermin; though he reassures a despondent Thelma that "[n]obody's trash," Harry believes otherwise: "We're all trash, really. Without God to lift us up and make us into angels



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we're all trash." Neither he nor Updike seems to have given consideration to the notion that perhaps it's not for us to wait for God to lift us up, that perhaps it's our duty to try to rise—by, among other things, acting selflessly and loving one another. But Harry gives no indication of knowing what it means to love someone. When Thelma worries about his health, he sees it as an example of "[t]hat strange way women have, of really caring about somebody beyond themselves." Is this meant as a joke by Updike on Harry? By Harry on himself? Or are Updike and Harry both being serious? "As you say," Harry remarks to Thelma at one point, "I still think I'm the center of the universe." And he still reduces relationships to sex, scrutinizing Thelma's grieving brood at her funeral and thinking: "When you're sexually involved with a woman, some of the focus spills down into her children, that she also spread her legs for." Thelma's widower, Ronnie, calls Harry "the coldest most selfish bastard I ever met," and complains that he never returned Thelma's love, to which Harry responds: "I *did* appreciate her. I did. She was a fantastic lay." Presumably, he thinks he's being nice, which is curious enough; but what is even more curious is that Updike seems to think there is something touching—even redeeming—about the fact that this grandfather has never advanced beyond the juvenile outlook of his thirty-years-younger self.

Harry may not have many redeeming qualities, but *Rabbit at Rest* has a few. Despite his aforementioned habit of speaking through Harry, Updike knows what average Americans think about—and knows what they *think*—and he can be splendid at capturing the way they talk about it. His prose remains smooth and readable, and he continues to display a fine eye for the telling detail. He is so observant and funny on the subject of Gulf Coast condominium life that one finds oneself wishing he had let Rabbit rest already and instead written a short novel about the people with whom Harry socializes in Florida. Finally, the relationship between Harry and his eight-year-old granddaughter, Judy, feels authentic. When he and the child are boating and the craft tips over, the thoughts that go through his head when he can't immediately locate her in the water strike one as exactly right; the episode is gripping, poignant, pathetic.

Yet there are too few such episodes here, and too much that feels bogus, inflated. One thinks especially of Harry's last-act escape from home, which seems motivated less by his circumstances than by Updike's desire for structural symmetry. And one is as troubled as ever by Updike's tendency to legitimize selfishness and dehumanize sex. Why, one cannot help wondering, have these books received such extraordinary popular and critical acclaim over the years? Perhaps it is because with the coming of the Sixties—and with Updike's shift of emphasis, in *Rabbit Redux* and *Rabbit Is Rich*, from the spiritual concerns of *Rabbit, Run* to more purely sociopolitical and socioeconomic matters—it was possible for Harry Angstrom to be seen by trend-conscious and politically motivated critics not merely as a case study in the "rabbit approach" to life (such a small, *human* subject!) but as a symbol of the supposedly harried, *Angst*-ridden middle America of the Vietnam era and afterward. One of the smaller ironies of the collapse of Communism is that it should have begun just as Updike was winding up the Rabbit series, thereby underscoring just how irrelevant the story of Harry Angstrom, for all its feverish bids at timeliness, has been to the deeper truths of American life in the last thirty years. One can only wonder what would have happened to Updike's art—and to his career—had he allowed Harry, after *Rabbit, Run*, to keep on running into eternity and chosen instead to write three follow-up novels to *The Centaur*.



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# The "Ring," the Metropolitan Opera, and James Levine

## *by Samuel Lipman*

For more than a century now, Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, finally completed in 1876, has constituted the supreme test of an opera company's greatness. Other operas—among them the remaining six of Wagner's major works—are difficult to do, as well as important. But despite all the challenges presented by such composers as Mozart, Verdi, and Strauss, and by Wagner's own *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*, both the immensity and the seriousness of the *Ring* place it in a class by itself.

It is easy to see why this should be so. The *Ring* takes four evenings to perform, and in its constituent parts—*Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*—presents a myth of the creation, and the destruction, of the world. As he did with his other operas, Wagner wrote the book of the *Ring* himself, drawing on Norse mythology but at the same time performing miracles of integration, concision, and clear exposition.

It is not simply that Wagner projected his view of the beginning and end of the world. And it is not simply that he peopled that world with gods and their runaway human offspring, with giants and dwarfs, with miracles and catastrophes. Wagner claimed his high place in the making of modern mythology by the creation on a colossal scale of all-too-believable characters motivated almost solely by greed, lust, and treachery. It is not that all Wagner's creations were so motivated: in Wotan's goddess daughter Brünnhilde, and in his human children Siegmund and Sieglinde and their son Siegfried, we find characters moved by love and even by pity. But the doom of these ineffably moving creatures is so inevitable, their tragedy so palpable, that the *Ring* quite unavoidably seems to document and deepen the night side of twentieth-century life.

It must not be forgotten that the *Ring* is *opera*: music setting words to be staged. However, this (in my opinion) correct definition of opera hardly leads one to expect Wagner's miraculous intensification and transformation of his own words through his music. When it was first written, and still today, the music of the *Ring* sweeps all before, bringing even Wagner's dullest expository stanzas to piercing life. Wagner's use of leading motives—short melodic passages of great beauty, each associated with a particular character, idea, or event—makes possible at once a marvel of musical and dramatic unity. The proof of the greatness of the *Ring*'s music is its wholly independent existence in the concert hall: such excerpts as the "Entrance of the Gods into Walhalla" (from *Das Rheingold*), "Wotan's Farewell and Magic Fire Music" (from *Die Walküre*), the "Forest Murmurs" (from *Siegfried*), and "Brünnhilde's Immolation" (from *Götterdämmerung*), even without the vocal line, remain, as they have been for almost a century, staples of the orchestral repertory.

A word must be said, too, about the voices in the *Ring*. Like the characters they limn, the voices required by Wagner are larger



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than life, demanding vocal power and endurance, and the ability to create dramatic entities. But strength and drama, necessary as they are in the *Ring*, do not alone suffice. The voices that carry this strength and drama must be firmly and solidly produced, of technical agility, and, above all, of *musical* sound.

I have not as yet mentioned what might be termed the *production* requirements for the *Ring*. Like all other operas, the *Ring* must be staged to be fully effective. Styles in theater and its staging have changed enormously since Wagner's day; indeed, there has been little change in the musical component of opera compared to what has happened to dramatic production in this century. For Wagner, one must assume (since the first performance of the *Ring* was at his own Bayreuth, under his own supervision) the best staging was realistic in the Romantic manner, with live animals, putatively real trees and rocks, and in what passed for the most authentic representation possible. Such realism ruled the operatic roost until the end of World War II.

Indeed, it was Wieland Wagner (the composer's grandson) who revolutionized operatic production with his 1951 Bayreuth production of the *Ring*, Jungian in psychological motivation, abstract, spare in visual design, and prevailingly dark in lighting. From the murky myth-complexes of Jung to the political simplifications of Marx must have seemed but a mere step, and by the 1970s leftism had triumphed in *Ring* productions, as it had everywhere in European opera. Radical opera stagings, however, quickly ditched the idea of painterly abstraction in favor of the most chillingly realistic (as in the 1976 Bayreuth centennial *Ring* production of Patrice Chéreau) depictions of capitalist vices.

Not surprisingly, then, great opera companies have always taken pride in their production of the *Ring*. In what now seems the halcyon period between the world wars, at least four cities were known in this regard: Berlin, Vienna, London, and New York. But whether one chooses to remember the Berlin Opera, the Vienna Opera, the now mythic International Seasons at London's Covent Garden, or the Metropolitan Opera in New York, one element of these performances, and one element only, now comes to mind: the remarkable musical quality of the singing and the conducting.

This was the golden age of such singers as baritone Friedrich Schorr, the tenor Lauritz Melchior, and the sopranos Frida Leider and Kirsten Flagstad. And it was the age of an almost embarassing profusion of conductors, among them the German Wilhelm Furtwängler, the English Sir Thomas Beecham, the Austrian Bruno Walter, and the Hungarian Fritz Reiner. Though we have no way of documenting very much of what pre-World War II Wagner performances looked like, we know both in glowing totality and ravishing detail just how they sounded. Today they make gripping listening, for they combine what can only be called bel canto singing, totally committed dramatic portrayals, and electrifying leadership from the podium.[1]

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1 A veritable encyclopedia of the vocal riches is contained in the compendious EMI LP set *Wagner on Record*. This set was available in the United States as Seraphim IG-6130, but now appears to have been deleted. It is a prime candidate for rerelease on CD.

Rather less known, and in most cases of far less wide circulation, are several remarkable recordings of extended material from the *Ring*, performed by the great Wagner conductors mentioned in the text. Thus some of Furtwängler's 1937 Covent Garden *Walküre* was available in the 1970s on Educational Media Associates RR-417, and two LPs of *Götterdämmerung* from the same cycle were available on EMA as RR-429. Some of Beecham's 1936 Covent Garden *Götterdämmerung* was available fifteen years ago as Unique Opera Recordings 234 A-C. Fritz Reiner's 1936 San Francisco *Walküre* Act II was available as EJS (Edward J. Smith) 234 A-B. These are all live recordings, but are all highly listenable. Bruno Walter recorded Act I and almost all of Act II of *Die Walküre* for HMV/EMI in Vienna in 1935; Act I is now available on CD as Angel CDH-61020, and Act II may be found on Danacord CD DACO-317/8.

All the above performances of these marvelous conductors are done with such singers as Flagstad, Melchior, Lehmann, Leider, and Schorr.



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For some years after World War II this exalted standard of singing was almost, if not quite, maintained. Thus we can now hear two marvelous Furtwängler *Ring* cycles, the first a 1950 La Scala radio broadcast with Flagstad[2] and the second a 1953 Rome Radio Italiana (RAI) broadcast without Flagstad, but with extraordinary singers nonetheless.[3] Broadcast *Ring* recordings, conducted by the now legendary Clemens Krauss and Hans Knappertsbusch and demonstrating the high standard of contemporary European Wagner performance, have been available from each year of the Bayreuth Festival in the 1950s; though these performances are too many to list here, special mention must be made of the 1951 Bayreuth broadcasts, conducted by Herbert von Karajan, of *Das Rheingold* and *Siegfried*.[4]

It may seem odd to the reader that the Metropolitan Opera has not been cited here as an important presence in *Ring* productions. The sad fact is that at no point in the period described above has the Metropolitan been an initiating factor in *Ring* production. During the 1920s and the 1930s, the Met used the best available Europoean singers; because the best at this time were truly great, the Met performances from the mid to late 1930s that we can still hear today are marvelous; it must be said that these performaces were conducted by the estimable Artur Bodanzky, an excellent conductor, unremembered today but clearly a master of his craft. After the war, the Met began to use the newer singers from abroad, supplementing them with such excellent native products as Margaret Harshaw, Rose Bampton (a Canadian), and especially the remarkable Helen Traubel.[5] The conductor for these 1940s and 1950s cycles was the highly routined and capable (but not musically original) Fritz Stiedry, Bodanzky's successor.

In the 1960s, it is true, the Met did bring Karajan to New York to install and conduct a version of his Salzburg *Ring*, much influenced by the Wieland Wagner production at Bayreuth. But Karajan did not get along with the Met's then-manager Rudolf Bing, and the project went no further than *Die Walküre*. It was not until 1975 that the Met finally completed its *Ring* cycle. Conducted by the efficient Sixten Ehrling, the 1975 Met *Ring* used (in the role of Brünnhilde) only one historically important singer, Birgit Nilsson; and Nilsson sang only in a small number of the performances. For the rest, the singing did not rise above the adequate, and the neo-Bayreuth staging, though still haunting, hardly reflected up-to-date trends in Wagner production.

For a decade and more after, the Met not only failed to perform a complete *Ring* cycle; it hardly performed the individual operas either. It was not until 1986-87 that the company began the task of mounting a new *Ring*. The first effort was *Die Walküre*, followed by *Das Rheingold* and *Siegfried* in 1987-88 and *Götterdämmerung* in 1988-89. The complete *Ring* has thus been in the Met repertory for the last two seasons, and there can be little doubt that the company is now treating the *Ring*— especially in the context of the paucity of new works it has produced in the last several decades—as the centerpiece of its activity.

From the outset, it was plain that the new production was to be not so much a Metropolitan as a James Levine *Ring*. Mr. Levine,

2 My LP of this, dating from the 1970s, is on Murray Hill 940477; a CD version is now available on Hunt Productions CDWFE-301.

3 The 1953 RAI broadcast was available on LP until last year as Seraphim IN-6148. It too will doubtless soon be available on CD.

4 *Das Rheingold* is to be found on CD as Melodram 27107; the *Siegfried* on Melodram 46106. A 1951 Karajan commercial recording from the same Bayreuth cycle, this time of Act III of *Die Walküre*, was available in the 1970s as EMI (Germany) Dacapo IC 181-03035/36.

5 Traubel is to be heard at very close to her best in a 1945 recording of Act III of *Die Walküre*, with the New York Philharmonic conducted by the splendid, though now forgotten, Artur Rodzinski. My copy of this performance is CBS SL-105.



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who came to the Metropolitan as Principal Conductor in 1973, became the Met's Music Director in 1975. Since then, despite a succession of titular administrative superiors and equals, Levine has ruled all artistic matters of the company with an iron hand. The man responsible for the staging of the Met *Ring* is Otto Schenk, a German director who, like Mr. Levine, had never done the *Ring* before.

Viewed from the standpoint of the stage production, the new *Ring* has seemed syncretic. It uses abstract elements, including many louring clouds, simple movements by the singers, and broad expanses of space untouched by very much scenery or very many props. But the production also relies heavily on romantic/realistic elements too, including bright lighting, authentic-looking rocks and trees, and highly detailed costumes. The impression made by the Schenk production *in toto* was heavily nondescript, with caution the rule, and daring ruled out.

The originality and power so lacking in the new Met *Ring* staging was hardly made up by any real musical distinction. From the outset it was clear that the Met was not to be an exception to the desuetude that has marked Wagnerian singing in Europe as well as in this country. It is not that Mr. Levine did not strive to employ the best-known vocal names of the day. But the famous names he did find—Jessye Norman as Sieglinde, Christa Ludwig as Fricka, and Hildegard Behrens as Brünnhilde, for example—seemed able to do little more than project, in mostly tremulous voice, local and minor details of the characters and situations they were portraying. Much the same must be said of the various singers who attempted the always difficult roles of Siegmund (Gary Lakes), Siegfried (Siegfried Jerusalem) and, especially, Wotan (Simon Estes and, mostly, James Morris). In general, the overall weight of each character and their interactions, with few exceptions, seemed to elude the singers.

Even more disturbing than the weakness of the singers was Mr. Levine's inability to convey the grand orchestral design of the entire gigantic work. Mr. Levine seemed content to use his undoubtedly excellent orchestra to create an overall impasto of rich and songful sound. Superficially, everything flowed; on a deeper level, everything got stuck. It is hardly clear why this should have been so: though Mr. Levine's tempos often seemed crushingly slow, it is my impression that they were by and large within the traditional mainstream. His tempo transitions —the changes between slow and fast, and fast and slow—were always well thought out and perhaps almost too smooth, for the necessary contrast in mood, and the interest such contrast brings, was lacking.

But it is always difficult, if not actually impossible, to relate specific musical details to the exact effect such details make on the listener. Historically, for example, slow conductors have on occasion been exciting, and fast conductors boring; loud conductors have sometimes seemed subtle, and muted conductors heavy; culturally sophisticated conductors have sometimes sounded gross, and unlettered conductors subtle. There are no recipes in musical performance, any more than there are recipes in art in general. It all comes down in the end to the conveying of an individually interesting idea of the work being performed, to conception of the musical material. Such a conception can hardly be put in words, for everything in music is a matter of the specific impact of the artist's personality on the musical text and its conventions. In the case of Mr. Levine's *Ring*, it does not seem too much to say that there seemed to be no such impact discernible.

It is difficult to gauge the public reaction to the new Met *Ring*. The Metropolitan Opera House has been just about full for all the performances during the past several seasons, and good seats—expensive seats, that is—have been at a premium. The audiences have seemed enthusiastic as well, if applause and bravos at the end are any sign. In particular, there can be little doubt that much of the enthusiasm at the performances has been directed toward Mr. Levine.

Critical reception, on the other hand, has hardly been so enthusiastic. There has been a general recognition in the press that the



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quality of the singing has not been outstanding, and that Mr. Levine's contribution has been rather less than memorable. Perhaps the best way to put the critical verdict is that there was widespread agreement that the *Ring* is wonderful music theater, and that the present production is the best we are likely to get in the foreseeable future. Put this way, it is plain that the journalistic reaction to the new Met *Ring* is part of the wider, albeit often quiet, despair so widely felt about today's musical world and its future.

Now, just this past summer, a new element has been added to the Met *Ring*. Between June 18 and June 21, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) televised the four operas, recorded at live Met performances, on successive nights. Though this was not the first *Ring* to have appeared on American television—Chéreau's 1976 Bayreuth *Ring*, conducted in a rigidly straightforward fashion by Pierre Boulez, was televised over the period of a month in the mid 1980s—the Met presentation was the first opportunity the American television audience has had to view the work as its composer originally intended. It is not clear how large the audience for this TV *Ring* actually was; press comment, at least in New York, seemed to center on its status as a television, rather than an operatic and musical, offering.

It cannot be denied that watching this *Ring* on television was a curious experience. Unlike the Chéreau *Ring*, there was no shock value in the staging; again unlike the Chéreau staging, there was no sinister atmosphere of late-capalistic doom to replace Wagner's own idea of the downfall of the gods and their succession by a naturally arising humanity. Furthermore, there were no examples of insensitivity in Mr. Levine's conducting to compare with Boulez's apparent musical callousness.

In the absence of any such negative factors, and in the equal absence, carried over from the live performances in the house of the past several seasons, of striking positive virtues, [6] one's attention was ineluctably transferred from the operas and their music to the reality of television itself. In the end, it must be stressed, it was not the singing, the conducting, or even Richard Wagner that carried—or rather failed to carry—the day. The Pyrrhic victor of the Met TV *Ring* was television as a medium. At its simplest, this triumph, if it can be called such, was most obviously caused by the incredibly intrusive English subtitles. The case for these snippets of translation can easily be made: viewer interest, and therefore the entire phenomenon of viewing in general, is vastly more easily commanded when the story, in its smallest details, can be easily followed. But just because the subtitles are so easily followed, and because they unavoidably take up so much of the television screen, they themselves become the cynosure of attention. And there is an even more serious problem: the words contained in the subtitles, inexact and even ham-handed representations of the original German, become touchstones for judging the accuracy and efficacy of the singers' acting and vocalism. No operagoer, no matter how close to the stage he might sit, has ever been able to make a real study of singers' facial expressions; now, through the magic of television, faces become not just conveyors of emotion and character, but dead giveways of insincerity and inauthenticity. This cruel test is in fact unpassable, for singers are thus faced with an unknown as well as an inapplicable standard. The effect is to provide viewers with a kind of illicit second sight, an unfair and profitless evaluative tool that can have no other outcome than a distancing of the audience from the artworks being offered.

It is this distancing that seems the most curious feature of the experience of watch-

6 In this generally disheartening description, a word must be spared for the great portrayal, in *Götterdämmerung*, of the arch-villain Hagen by the Finnish basso Matti Salminen. To the best of my knowledge, vocally and dramatically his was a historically unparalleled performance, surpassing even that of Ludwig Weber with Sir Thomas Beecham at Covent Garden in 1936. Indeed, Salminen's monologues were the only moment in the more than fifteen hours of the Met *Ring* when the performance caught fire.



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ing the *Ring* on television. It has been justly remarked that the greatest tyranny of television as a medium is the determination by the camera—and ultimately by the program's director—rather than by the viewer of what will be shown, and therefore of what will be seen. Viewers of opera on television are thus doubly transfixed: by the reality of the camera's omnipotence and by the horrid interest provided by each new flickering of the subtitles.

It must be realized that watching an opera on television is quite different formally from listening to an opera—or any other kind of music, for that matter—on a recording. In the case of the recording (as is with radio), the non-auditory attention of the listener is free to roam; the imagination is set free, and the artwork is granted free existence in a kind of ethereal space. By contrast, in the case of television, the body no less than the mind is tethered to the screen, and the viewer is reduced to a state of passivity in which the only possible resistance is precisely that experience of distancing which has been mentioned above. We should be happy, I suppose, that the poison of television also provides its own antidote; the question under discussion here, however, is not whether viewers can survive, but whether they can witness and comprehend, on television, an artistic masterpiece.

All this would not matter so much were it not so clear that the Met TV *Ring* represents for the company both the culmination of its recent history and the hoped-for road to its assured future as a financially thriving institution. There can be no doubt about it: the financial requirements of the Metropolitan Opera—the annual budget is now close to a hundred million dollars—mean that it can no longer be thought of as a New York institution dependent on New York sources for funding. It is true that this fact has long been known, and was the reason that both the Met radio broadcasts and the Metropolitan Opera Guild (along with its publication *Opera News*) have bulked so large in the Met management's thinking since the 1930s. Now the only truly national marketing medium is television, and it was unavoidable that the Met, given the scale on which those responsible for it think it must run, should find in television its salvation.

But in the past, national recognition for the Met has meant little more than doing on a country-wide scale what the Met was doing on its home turf anyway; in this regard, one need only cite the profusion of Met radio broadcasts featuring nondescript casts. What is so special about the existence of the Met TV *Ring* is the omnipresent impression that the Met *Ring* was conceived early on as a television presentation of necessity based on an opera house performance, rather than a live performance that just happened to be televised.

There can be little doubt, for example, that the stage direction of the operas was carefully planned, not just for the television tapings but for all the performances, so that closeups, rather than wide views of the stage, could be used at all times; television, it must be remembered, is vastly more suited to close shots than to panoramas. Similarly, the visual details of the production—the scenery and the costumes—must have been planned to be effective on television. There can be little doubt too that in casting, what might be called telegenic singers were chosen in preference to their less attractive, but in some cases perhaps more gifted, colleagues.

The Metropolitan Opera is now at a crossroads. In the last two years it has had three administrative directors. They have been Bruce Crawford, who came from the world of advertising and has now returned there, while still maintaining a considerable power base in the Met board; Hugh Southern, the former Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, whose arrival at the Met in the fall of 1989 occasioned much skepticism, and who managed to remain in the position for only a very well-paid nine-month period; and now Joseph Volpe, a company administrative insider who has risen from the ranks to the top.

There will be much attention paid to Mr. Volpe's pronouncements and actions, for



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there is now a subtle impression in the air that Mr. Levine's position, though as yet unshaken, is no longer quite unshakable. It is in any case difficult to avoid the feeling that the present artistically becalmed, not to say undistinguished, condition of the Met will cause the asking of many serious questions about the company's goals and prospects. It is clear that in Mr. Volpe the Met has an excellent administrator, knowledgeable about the company and about the house.

It is also clear that Mr. Volpe very much belongs to the new breed of arts administrators—savvy, tough, and not inclined to be sentimental about the art they administer. On this point, a passage from John Rockwell's story in *The New York Times* of August 2, announcing Mr. Volpe's appointment, should be quoted:

> [Mr. Volpe] does not even collect opera records or attend far-flung performances for his own pleasure.
>
> "I am not an opera groupie . . . I like opera, but I can't say that I love it. But I do love running a theater."

What is not clear as yet is just what powers Mr. Volpe will have in his own right, and especially what powers he will have vis-à-vis Mr. Levine. Whatever the present politics of the Metropolitan may turn out to be, no one will disagree that the old days of just turning out first-class opera for a loyal audience in the opera house are over. For those who now run the Met, its future, for better or worse, lies in television; on the currently available evidence, the same cannot be said about the future of the great operas, among them Wagner's *Ring*, of the past.



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# Poems *by Theodore Weiss, Brendan Galvin & Karl Kirchwey*

## Lucky

How learn to be contented
with what is, to desire
the things you this moment
are lucky enough to have?

Letters packing checks
or some unexpected praise,
as if a phrase could strike
off sparks from a fire

you first started, how
can they compete with this
special delivery of leaves,
so prodigal they geyser,

bruise-red, worn old gold,
on every breeze? Stamped
as they are by every second,
they accurately relate

all you need to know.
This valedictory ticking
of a cricket, our grass's
last, amounts to music



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apt as any instrument
is master of. And still
the human with its making
is no less considerable,

confessing treasure
too secretive or diffuse
to be appreciated at once,
like the face, cracked

and faded in a mosaic,
yet sufficiently haunting
to trace itself in the mind,
through your feelings find

renewal on your fingertips
as they read the pulsings
in your loved one's word-
and sigh-brushed lips.

—*Theodore Weiss*



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## Something kept

As though one could get drunk
on one's own blood, grown deeper,
darker, richer with time, assorted
passions spicing, the seasons adding
their bit, here in beginning autumn
our roses break out again, slack
in their petals.
But though that's
where we are, the cooling off going
on, dawn shines, convinced of itself,
knowing nothing beyond the changes,
everlasting for their instant,
ceaseless in the air and earth
and us.
As if cracks had spread,
spaces are opening in the weather,
like a giant locust that, leveled
by a tornado unexpectedly blowing in,
now shows its dense, elegant rings,
patterning only time and the sedulous
elements could produce.
Something kept
in the root-cellar, a long-stacked
vintage wine, pressed from grapes
how many years, how many continents,
away.
Now, in this instant ripened,
remembering nothing past itself,
that something shoots out windy flags
of fragrance, shoots swift-darting
currents up and down the blood.

Who would have thought—beyond
the wreckage, trees uprooted, cattle
drifting through—such new delights
could bob from such belated flood.

—*Theodore Weiss*



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## A ring of quail bones

I found them just off the fireroad
by the marsh, around a low
bush of wind-stripped sweet gale,
breastbones like ploughshares,
skulls papery, still unscuffled where
they'd crouched in their circle,
heads outward, still facing
whatever night brings, ready
to explode up the air
that found them out and feathered them
a flake at a time and left them under
rain and crust. This morning,
my gaze drawn upward by a muffled
thump at the skylight, three
drank on yellow feet
from a gathered night rain,
their bellies patterned with arrowheads,
another little drama of the fall;
and certain gifts from childhood
occurred, models of perfection I had
no fingers fine enough to assemble.

—*Brendan Galvin*



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# Natural history

The jewelers' windows have been muted with
black felt, their crystal riot locked away
for one more night. And yet, so profligate,
so close-set is their unrelenting blaze,
that, after dark, imagination brings
its own combustion, worn to one blood-red
cabochon by the friction of its passage.

*How many hands are worn away with toil*
*so that a single knuckle shines resplendent?*
Silica dust glitters and tangs the air
from somewhere high above, like snow wind-driven
across a pristine landscape of spruce tips.
But in the risky sandstone vineyards and
arbors of pomegranate finials

five storeys up, there are two midway angels
whose only thoughts are barnacled with earth.
They bring a local weather with them (rain),
although the blinking sign above them reads
AUGUST FIFTH 10:00 PM TOMORROW: FAIR.
Their oilskins whicker as they shift along
the narrow scaffold, and their arc lamps veer

madly. Their backs are to the world of sense.
They mix the common sand with water struck
from the brass bole of a standpipe. Their hands
are turned against the vegetable stone,
which holds no ransom for them anymore.
They are trying to drive their shadows from the wall.
By dawn, with filthy tears, they will succeed.

—*Karl Kirchwey*



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Art

# Classical fragments

*by Jed Perl*

Classic, classical, classicism: these words suggest conflicting ideas and ideals, styles and epiphanies, neos and revivals. Many of us carry around our own intuitive sense of what classicism is; and some of us know what some others of us are referring to; but it is no insult to this complex of values and apprehensions to say that any exploration of classicism turns into an excursion in a house of mirrors. (Classicism has become romantic.) The classical achievement is the one in which the fractured images in the house of mirrors, for a moment, cohere. Which is not the certainty one hoped for.

"On Classic Ground," the Tate Gallery's exploration of the modern artist's love affair with an idealistically archaic Mediterranean culture,[1] found a strikingly contrasting setting in London, a city that remains a Dickensian panorama packed with all the world's variegated physiognomies and types and destinies. To see the classicizing art of Picasso, Maillol, Matisse, Léger, Gris, Derain, Braque, de Chirico, and a host of others gathered together in the midst of a fast-paced modern metropolis is to feel how much this classical idea, with its elements of escapist fantasy, is born of urban sophistication and a sophisticated reaction against sophistication.

In 1921, André Gide was asked to comment on the idea of classicism for the journal *La Renaissance*. His observations—in the form, typical of Gide, of several brief notes, written at different times and commenting on one another—aim for simplicity and keep skirting paradox. "The triumph of individualism and the triumph of classicism merge. But the triumph of individualism resides in the renunciation of individuality." Later on: "I would almost make the two synonymous—classical and French—if the first could lay claim to exhausting the French genius and had romanticism not succeeded in making itself French." Later on: "Let us integrate. All that classicism refuses to integrate threatens to turn against it."

The attitude with which Picasso, Braque, de Chirico, Gris, Derain took up the archaic nude, the pastoral landscape, the harlequin and pierrot was anything but straightforward. The artists were reaching for archetypes, but these were, especially after World War I, fashionable archetypes. Quite often, in the best of the work, the self-consciousness of fashion is as much a preoccupation as the classical world or classical taste that has become newly fashionable. The artists may

1 "On Classic Ground: Picasso, Léger, de Chirico and the New Classicism 1910-1930" was on view at the Tate Gallery, London, from June 6 through September 2, 1990. A catalogue by the show's curator, Elizabeth Cowling, and Jennifer Mundy has been published by the Tate (264 pages, £14.95 paper); an expanded edition, containing twelve original essays by as many European and American scholars, is also available (412 pages, £45).



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have in mind the purity of fifth-century-B.C. sculpture, or the unaffectedness of a peasant dance in a village square; but such an accretion of exposition and connection—literary, pictorial, philosophic—crowds around these primal images that the artist is constantly forced to choose between various interpretations and attitudes. The emotional coloration in the greatest works that were produced in those years comes from the combination of formal lucidity and stylistic ambivalence with which the artists weave through this checkered history. The most compelling works are at once saying hello and goodbye to the archaic dream.

At the heart of the classical idea in Western visual art is the kinetic power of the male figure. In early-fifth-century Greece and in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy it is through athletic figures, coming together in situations of stress or ease, that the fluidity of life is transmuted but not frozen into the orderly forms of art. David was the last artist to build a major style out of this classical idea, though it was a sign of the times that his figures were a little wooden. Ingres is the paradigmatic figure in the confrontation of the modern imagination and the classical imagination, because he insisted on the classical idea while lacking any enthusiasm for the male figure as a dramatic player. With Ingres, the unaccountable operations of genius keep transforming the conventions and problems of a stale classical idea into something arresting, eccentric, anti-classical, and, quite often, sublime. (Meanwhile, the full-bodied spirit of classical figure composition has its continuation in the romanticism of Delacroix.)

With Ingres, classicism as kitsch and classicism as formalism confront one another. In the *Apotheosis of Homer* and *Jesus among the Doctors*, despite brilliant passages, formalism becomes a form of kitsch. (Ingres's love of Raphael was often his undoing, perhaps because he couldn't face the extent to which Raphael's art, despite all the beautiful dewy-eyed peasant girls, was based on the male nude.) Sometimes, it seems as if Ingres is best off with a kitsch subject: in the *Joan of Arc*, Ingres's classical taste is forced to work, as it were, in counterpoint to the subject matter, and the result is a tour de force of line-becoming-form. Ingres's masterpieces—among them the *Odalisque and Slave*, *The Turkish Bath*, *The Comtesse d'Haussonville*, and *The Princess de Broglie*—these are works in which, in one sense, everything that has anything to do with a classical past has been expunged. Yet it is precisely after the rout of the subject matter of the classical world, when Ingres is most deeply sunk into the particularities of the nineteenth century, that his very personal understanding of Raphaelesque classicism surges forward and carries him into the stratosphere. Only in these paintings, with their anti-classical subjects, does Ingres's heretofore neoclassical line regain true classical weight and force.

It is Ingres's maddening relation to classicism that the moderns adored. Maurice Denis wrote in 1905: "He always retained that 'happy naïveté' which he recommended to his pupils. I noticed in the foreground [of *The Turkish Bath*] a little still life, a few cups that might have been painted by a child: if Monsieur Ingres had lived longer, he would have painted like Rousseau."

The Tate Gallery show, which assembled a Mediterranean tradition out of artists working in France, Italy, and Catalan Spain between 1900 and 1930, was not without elements of the wrong kind of revisionism. Some of the Italians and Spaniards were academic artists who no amount of art-historical exegesis can make interesting, and the dry brown modeling in the work of Mariano Andreu, Achille Funi, Joaquim Sunyer, and others cast a pall over corners, walls, and whole rooms at the Tate. Yet the show did have its inspired juxtapositions. The heavy limbs of the nude that Maillol called *The Mediterranean*—"It is beautiful; it has no meaning," Gide remarked after it was shown at the Salon d'Automne in 1905—were near Picasso's massive *Two Nudes* of 1906. Another Maillol, *Torso of the Ile de France*



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(1921), was a three-dimensional relative of Matisse's 1919 still life *Plaster Torso, Bouquet of Flowers.* Many works by Henri Laurens, a great artist too little known in the United States, were juxtaposed with works by his dear friend Braque, as well as by Picasso: there are interesting parallels between the intermingling of Cubist and classical forms in the work of these three. It was also good to have a classicizing late work by Renoir (from Picasso's collection) near Picasso's Renoiresque nudes, and a Cézanne bathers near Gris's drawing after the Cézanne bathers that Matisse owned.

Whether we imagine modern art as beginning with Courbet or with Manet, with Monet or with Cézanne, this period that has been defined by its very present-tense-ness is now over a hundred years old. Ours has been the "modern" century, and as it moves inexorably to its close, the attempts to make a definitive reckoning on the modern movement in the arts take on an urgency, at least in some people's minds. But there's often something demagogic about these attempts to sum up the period: they dehumanize as they delimit. The truth of the matter is that most of what the future will contain is already present in the style just past. So often in the history of art, the earth-shattering changes are matters of emphasis. And perhaps what is even more confounding than our sense that something in modernism—its purity, its reductiveness—is over, is our sense that much of the late twentieth century's obsession with historical styles turns out to have been contained in modern art all along. At "On Classic Ground" the modern movement contains many classicisms, and one of the great strengths of the show is how it demonstrates that modern classicism weaves back, through the radicalism of the classic moment of Cubism, to the classicism of the 1890s or the 1850s. To live in 1915 or 1920 and think about Corot wasn't to reject Cubism, but to underline the extent to which the patterning of light and dark in Corot, which moves through the solidity of forms, contains Cubism and is contained by Cubism. Some art historians have argued that the harder, more closed forms in post-World War I paintings such as Picasso's *Three Musicians* and the Gris harlequins are not truly Cubist; but what of the elements of the classical —and almost literally Doric—architecture in Braque's archetypally Analytic Cubist *Homage to Bach*? Is that truly modern?

Artists know how to embrace contradictory ideas simultaneously. . . . In Matisse's Nice period unimagined reconciliations take place. Ingres, Delacroix, Courbet, and Corot turn out to have worked in tandem, and classicism, romanticism, and naturalism are united in a style that looks more modern with each passing day. . . . With Picasso, Gris, and Derain, the *commedia dell'arte* is presented as a classical idea, but a classical idea that is indebted mostly to Watteau, who is classical not in style but in spirit.

After seeing "On Classic Ground," one's sense of the Italian presence in modern classicism remains as tantalizingly incomplete as ever. Will we ever grasp de Chirico whole? To reject everything he did after World War I, as New York's Museum of Modern Art basically has done, is to whittle a megalomaniacal (and perhaps in some respects unfulfilled) imagination down to orthodox modernist size. But to accept the late de Chirico whole, as the Neo-Expressionists of the early 1980s were wont to do, is to turn a man who surely wanted to express himself within painting into an art-market performance artist (which may be, at moments, but only at moments, what de Chirico meant to be). In any event, the range of de Chirico was stirringly apparent at "On Classic Ground." He was seen at his most purely Italianate, in *Roman Plaza (Mercury and the Metaphysicians)* (1920); in his Italianate-touched-with-Bocklin-Romanticism manner in *Roman Village* (1922); in his Baroque self-portrait mode; in the self-consciously modernist coloring of classical nudes, like *Roman Women* (1926); and in the wacko Etruscanism of *Gladiators* (1928). Homage and parody are not easily separated in these



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works, and there is considerable poetry to this unholy alliance, though it is not always easy to know what is and what isn't intentional. (One suspects that de Chirico's gifts were not always a match for his ambitions.) All the same, de Chirico's originality, all through the Twenties, is beyond doubt. He personifies the florid melancholy that is an essential element in Italian modernism. It's there as well in the bold yet often unresolved images of Mario Sironi. Sweeter, but with his own darkening-days melancholy, is Carlo Carra: his 1931 *Woman by the Sea*, with its carefully felt-through naïveté, like a folk-art sign board, hung near a reclining figure by Picasso and looked very strong.

One theme in the art of this period is not discussed very often. What of the gatherings of men without women and women without men? What of this premodern sociability that has elements of homoeroticism but also of adolescent friendship and religious rite? On the cover of the catalogue and the poster for the show is Picasso's *Two Women Running on the Beach* (1922): these maenads fill up the whole universe. Not included in "On Classic Ground," despite the many loans from the Musée Picasso, are Picasso's major all-male paintings, *The Pipes of Pan* and *The Letter*. These were the macho Spaniard's seemingly heartfelt responses to Diaghilev and Cocteau. De Chirico's *Gladiators* has a homoerotic element; indeed, a great deal of de Chirico is about men alone together. Then there is Derain's *Harlequin and Pierrot* (unfortunately not included in this show), and Matisse's *The Three O'Clock Session* (1924), a painting of a painter (female) and model (female). All of this suggests something other than bourgeois conventions, something beyond the predictable squaring-off of the family. And yet the commentators remain fairly silent . . . perhaps because these commentators, who deal in theories about the social side of art, are committed to the idea that this period, during and after World War I, is a most bourgeois and reactionary one in French and Italian art. That Picasso, the bourgeois of the rue la Boëtie, could entertain other thoughts, this undoes the theory.

Classicism, in the early 1920s, is a crossroads. At one end, classicism leads into surrealism: Picasso and Masson use classical mythology as the prologue to surrealist iconography; the Minotaur, drawn in the line of Ingres, tears off into the Unconscious. At the other end, classicism intercepts Neoplasticism: Léger uses the neutral forms of de Stijl as the building blocks for his Constructivist reconstructions of David and Ingres. "On Classic Ground" generously contained many paintings that look different, one from the other, but the show's theme could have more easily accommodated a 1921 Mondrian than some of the brown academic pastorals that were included.

Many factors have conspired to make the art of the World War I and post-World War I period newly fashionable. There is the sheer novelty that much of this material has for museum shows and doctoral dissertations and the art market. For the theoretically minded, there are the easy (but not necessarily telling) associations that can be made between a "return to order" and national style in art and a rise in reactionary, often nationalistically oriented political activity. There are deeper reasons as well. Without denying the immense appeal of classicism as a stylistic pose, as a form of nostalgia, I suspect that it is classicism's tireless critique of eclecticism that really holds us. As 1980s turn to 1990s, all the best contemporary painting and sculpture turns out to be classical at heart. Perhaps classicism equals completeness, the completeness we can only imagine in a world that is permanently on the verge of a nervous breakdown.



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Theater

# The history and lamentable comedy of Joseph Papp's "Richard III"

*by Donald Lyons*

Art *after* Art *goes out, and all is Night.*
—Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*

*Dramatis personae*

OPTIMISTA, *a theatergoer* VENDOR
CYNICUS, *a theatergoer* LOUDSPEAKER

SCENE 1

*A park in the heart of New York. 7:30 on a balmy August night.*

VENDOR: Get your plot summaries. Family trees of the Plantagenets. Ice-cold. Keep track of who kills who. One dollar. Three for two dollars.
OPTIMISTA: Funny guy. Should we get one?
CYNICUS: If the production does its job, we won't need it. If it doesn't, it won't matter who kills who.

SCENE 2

*10:30. Rains come during the second intermission, which follows Act IV, Scene 3.*

LOUDSPEAKER: We regret to announce that this evening's performance has been canceled.

SCENE 3

OPTIMISTA *and* CYNICUS *repair to a coffee shop.*

OPTIMISTA: We missed the dream parade of ghosts and Bosworth Field and "A horse! A horse!" It might have been a lively ending.
CYNICUS: Likely it would have been more of the same. Let us rather thank "Zeus who marshals the thunderheads," as Robert Fagles puts it in his wonderful new translation of *The Iliad.*
OPTIMISTA: At least it was nice to see Denzel Washington get a crack at Richard. He's an imposing and appealing actor, and he did the wooing scene credibly.
CYNICUS: He is and he did. But it would have been nicer to see him in a production that had given him leisure to learn to articulate blank verse, to grow comfortable in the role and, above all, to project some coherent take on the man. He was left in potentia.
OPTIMISTA: Were you at all confused by the racial salad on stage? Let's see: Richard was black; his brother Clarence white; his brother Edward white but then one of Edward's sons was black and another was white. And Richard's mother was . . .
CYNICUS: Well, what with all the wimples and coronets and furbelows and gonfalons I couldn't make out most players' race anyway. And it was windy and you know I'm blind as a bat in the first place. Who gives a damn really if the thing is good, and otherwise clear? What irks me about Mr. Papp's casting ideology is not its good intentions, but its evident assumption that good intentions are all that is needed in art. The cramming of minority players into dull Shakespeare is no favor to them or to Shakespeare. What generally happens is that those with experience and technique make an impres-



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sion, as Mary Alice does here in the role of the curse-spitting old Lancastrian queen, Margaret, while the rest flounder.

OPTIMISTA: The same is true of the white performers, among whom the standout here was Nancy Palk as Yorkist Edward IV's queen, Elizabeth. She was crisply articulate and slimly statuesque. A little touch of Hepburn in the night. She was the mother of the little princes in the Tower and of the girl who is to marry Richmond, slayer of Richard and founder of the Tudor dynasty.

CYNICUS: Exactly. But just as Mr. Papp relies on very public gestures of racial righteousness as a substitute for the hard work of art, I noticed recently that he has not the courage of his convictions when it comes to reverse racism. I carry with me the *Times* clipping in which he weaselingly but discernibly supports the first Equity decision to forbid a Welsh actor from playing a Eurasian in *Miss Saigon*. May I read it to you one more time?

OPTIMISTA: If you must, but I still think *Miss Saigon* must be a typical Brit pro-gulag tantrum and that Equity almost did us an unwitting favor in keeping it from our shores.

CYNICUS: Agreed, agreed. We were both able to be *tertii gaudentes* at the clash of Equity's reverse racism and *Miss Saigon*'s hymn of hate to America. But Mr. Papp's words do bear repeating: "I don't like anybody to tell me how to cast a play. But I think that for people concerned with race it was the proper position for them to take . . . . As a producer, I have a certain resistance to their position, but as a citizen, and because of my commitment to minority casting, I think they did the proper and heroic thing." "Heroic" is good. This craven abdication of artistic freedom to "people concerned with race" I find chilling, and chillingly phrased. One hopes the Rev. Sharpton will have no casting tips for Mr. Papp next summer.

OPTIMISTA: Yes but to be fair didn't he later endorse Equity's flipflop?

CYNICUS: Well, his statement on *that* occasion was so delphic we'd need to open entrails to clarify it. I have *it* here too. Let me...

OPTIMISTA: Oh no, please. Enough. The


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production we saw tonight did have a certain dignity. I see that the director, Robin Phillips, was Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival in Canada for seven years and has an impressive resumé. That accounts for the sober, professional tone. Do you remember, by contrast, that *Tempest* we saw in the park a few years back with helicopters landing and Miranda played as *Carmen* Miranda?

CYNICUS: By that company called Malibu Mimes?

OPTIMISTA: You know perfectly well their real name is . . .

CYNICUS: I know, but I'm fond of a cheap pun. I do grant, however, that this play was not a trendy rape of Shakespeare, although one is never certain that this outfit's next "mounting" of Shakespeare will not again be just such a rape. It was indeed sober, respectful, and dignified, but with the minor drawback that the sobriety was that of a morgue, the respectfulness that of a costume funeral, and the dignity that of a corpse. Mr. Phillips's solution to the play's presentation of a bewildering succession of historical victims was to have his players stride center stage, strike an attitude, and orate. It was like an old-fashioned school pageant: "My name is John Quincy Adams. My brief presidency was an unhappy one. Curses upon my successor, Andrew Jackson." And not being a parent of one of the little pageanteers, one grew restless.

OPTIMISTA: But it looked good—the red arches, the turrets against the night sky, all that deep blue coronation velvet. More than good. It looked right. The play does, after all, have a stiff, archaic quality, a litanylike linearity of diction, that the production matched.

CYNICUS: Yes, the production chose to replicate the text's worst qualities. It should have chosen to illuminate, to dramatize them. Of course, it's a bad play to begin with.

OPTIMISTA: I know you expect me to sputter with indignation at that statement. "But . . . but . . . Colley Cibber . . . David Garrick . . . 'Richard's himself again' with Olivier winking into the camera . . . centuries of wicked popularity . . . most performed after *Hamlet*." Well, I defy expectation. Actually, I agree, as anyone would who loves the later plays about Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V. I *could* take a cue from Carolyn G. Heilbrun's extraordinary piece in the Arts and Leisure section from the Sunday *Times* . . . give me a second . . . I have, as you see, my clippings also . . . and simply aver *Richard III* naturally riles you because of your gender. She trenchantly, if a bit redundantly, exposes the play's indictment of "sheer masculine ambition . . . 'manly' dominance, extreme machismo . . . killing as though it were a badge of masculinity . . . the manly protagonist's need to prevail, to control or destroy . . . male rampage . . . manly violators . . . masculine ambition." But I'll give you a break. One should perhaps be grateful that the New York Shakespeare Festival is too enamored of one ideology to try to work idiocies like this into its productions.

CYNICUS: The mind boggles. What would an antimasculinist *Richard III* look like?

OPTIMISTA: Oh, phallic humps . . . the redemptive Henry VII played by a woman . . . *imagine-toi.*

CYNICUS: No thanks. Actually in this play Shakespeare is struggling to animate separately and then to fuse two awkward and incompatible traditions. First, he has the lip-smacking villain out of the old mystery plays . . . Herod and such . . . and out of the new university plays like Marlowe's *Tamburlaine.* There are at least two problems with such a figure as central focus: monotony and insincerity. Here, Richard's victims fall like ninepins in defiance of psychology and common sense. The sameness is stupefying. And the palliative to this sameness is a nervous, self-dramatizing, metallic humor that is neither funny nor carthartic, but is in fact "camp" in its real sense of insincere, phony, febrile. "Off with his head" and such belong to this note, a note that subverts the character to no artistic purpose. What is strongest on this side of Richard will, refined, issue in Iago. And of course Shakespeare, being Shakespeare, adds to this cliché an understanding of a "deformed" man's sexual self-pity that is wholly his own and that will issue in Othello.



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OPTIMISTA: Actually the picture of Richard in Thomas More's *Historia*, Shakespeare's ultimate anti-Ricardian source, is more interesting than that in the play. It seems more embedded in a believable texture of history.

CYNICUS: And it's history that's Shakespeare's other problem in *Richard III*. He had to wrap up Lancastrian horrors from the just-ended reign of Henry VI (Margaret is his widow), scamper through three Yorkist reigns (Edward IV, the boy Edward V, Richard himself), make time for Richard's sexual-marital-dynastic shenanigans, and clear the stage for the Tudor king who would put a stop to the civil bloodshed. No wonder he resorted to the convenience of Richard as handy dispatcher. It is all too crowded and slapdash and without enough *moral* shape. Of course, it contains in adumbration . . . I almost said in miniature . . . the great national tale of sin, pollution, and redemption that will be told with full orchestration, including the *true* humor of Falstaff, in the *Henriad*. Even here in *Richard III*, we hear a serious Richard say, "I am in/So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin" and a barely-filled-in Richmond/Henry VII promise "smooth-faced peace/. . . smiling plenty and fair prosperous days." Serious moral themes do briefly raise their heads. But Shakespeare needed to go back yet another century in time to find the right matter for what is to my mind the great English epic.

OPTIMISTA: Like Tolstoy, who abandoned the idea of writing a novel about the Decembrists of the 1820s and opened *his* great epic, *War and Peace*, in 1805, a much remoter time. But let's mention too the rare lyric lines in *Richard III* that could only be the young, sweet Shakespeare: "Even in the afternoon of her best days"; and of the little princes: "Their lips were four red roses on a stalk,/Which in their summer beauty kissed each other"; and Clarence's dream.

CYNICUS: Yes, but mostly swallowed in this production. But you know I think all . . . or let me cautiously say most . . . great ages of poetic theater were intensely conscious of writing the national story. Take the Greeks. Aeschylus's first play, *The Persians*, was about the Greek victory over Persia and his greatest achievement, *The Oresteia*, celebrates the establishment of law in Athens.

OPTIMISTA: That certainly works with the Spaniards. I was just reading Lope's *Fuente Ovejuna* and Calderon's *Love After Death*. Both intensely national, among other things. You might have a tougher time with Corneille and Racine, though.

CYNICUS: Oh Corneille is no problem; a lot of his stuff is really about Richelieu's nation-building. Racine I grant you is sticky, but among the Germans Schiller works, though Goethe . . .

OPTIMISTA: What I think must be pointed out, though, is that in today's uncreative times this sense of history lurking inside drama can be glibly abused. Think how eagerly contemporary British dramaturges link, say, Mrs. Thatcher to Auschwitz or Richard III to Oswald Mosley.

CYNICUS: Yes they have the complementary vice to us, who so often seem innocent of history. They play tricks with it; we ignore it. Has there been an American dramatist who's come to serious grips with American history?

OPTIMISTA: O'Neill tried in plays like *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *More Stately Mansions*, but . . .

CYNICUS: Yes, "but." His glory lies not there. But we must be going.

OPTIMISTA: Oh look. What's this that has fallen out of my program? It's a flyer headed, "SAVE THE ARTS!" It has a picture of Michelangelo's *David* with his groin covered by a sticker reading, "BANNED IN THE U.S.A.?" It alludes to "well-funded conservative extremists." I do not understand any of this. Who are these extremists? Julius II? Does Mr. Papp wish to ban Michelangelo on the ground that his inspired, deeply reverent images of Judaic and Christian figures constitute an encroachment of religion upon the state and therefore ought not to be funded by the NEA, which ought to support representations of Biblical figures only if immersed in urine or obscenely contorted?

CYNICUS: My dear O, sometimes your socratically dry irony leaves me quite in the dust. Now we really must be going.



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Music

# Janáček at the City Opera

*by Dana Mack*

At last, the works of the great Moravian composer Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) are beginning to find their way into America's opera houses. In Europe, the efforts of Australian conductor Sir Charles Mackerras (who has devoted his career to the faithful rendering —and editing—of Janáček's often problematic scores) have, over the past three decades, brought considerable attention to Janáček's work. Especially in England, where Mackerras was long the music director of the National Opera, Janáček's *Jenufa* and *Kát'a Kabanová* have become staples of the repertoire. This winter will see *Kát'a Kabanová* in a rare New York production at the Metropolitan Opera, and under Mackerras's direction. Lucky thing, too, for even with the availability of Mackerras's excellent recordings with the Vienna Philharmonic, [1] Janáček's work remains little known to American operagoers, and his remarkable musical language seems hardly to have penetrated the American sensibility.

It has not, most certainly, penetrated the sensibility of Christopher Keene, the new general director of the New York City Opera. Or so one may conclude from his lame interpretation of Janáček's final masterpiece, *From the House of the Dead* (1928), which received its American premiere at the New York State Theater on August 28. Janáček's melodic eloquence and rhapsodic forward propulsion, when realized through a conductor alive to these musical qualities, can have a profound effect upon an audience. Janáček was not one to eschew the passions, either in subject matter or composition; on the contrary, his operas tend to whip up a feverish excitement. But no such excitement was created by this City Opera performance, neither by the conductor nor by the vocalists. Indeed, the libretto, based upon Dostoevsky's memories of political imprisonment in a Siberian camp, might better have been spoken.

This is sad because *From the House of the Dead* would seem an ideal vehicle for a youthful, middle-sized company like the City Opera. The opera's staging, though grand enough in conception for a house as large as the State Theater, requires only a modest investment—the sets are few and spare and the costumes plain and simple. More important, it has no central character that requires the services of a "star," and the score generally makes no great demands on any one voice. Indeed, *From the House of the Dead* is a true ensemble work. It features striking choral sections and satisfying, long arioso passages. Conceived for an almost all-male cast—there is one major part for soprano, and it's a trouser role—the opera provides enough dramatic and musical substance to be extremely rewarding for young voices.

1 These recordings, on the Decca label, include *Jenufa* and *The Cunning Little Vixen* (414 483-2; 414 129-20), both available on CD, and *Kát'a Kabanová* (D224D2), *The Makropoulos Case* (D144D2), and *From the House of the Dead* (D51D2), currently available only as digitally recorded LPs.



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And because the story—fragmented as it is—focuses on three prisoners' separate recountings of increasingly brutal and senseless crimes, there is relief for each principal voice as well as a steady rise in dramatic tension.

But despite the accomplishments of such earnest and able talents as John Absalom and Eugene Perry (the latter made an impressive and touching debut as the tortured Shishkov, driven by false pride and anger to the murder of his faithful wife), and despite Rhoda Levine's uncontrived staging and the atmospheric restraint of John Conklin's barracks-like sets, the production never really got off the ground. The primary responsibility here, of course, lies with Mr. Keene, who seems to be an adherent of that school of musical thought which prohibits listening to recordings while studying the score. What else could explain the dull-wittedness that marked his approach to Janáček's characteristically repetitive melodic idiom? This idiom demands both careful attention to dynamic variation and orchestration, as well as constant forward drive to dramatic climax. Above all, it demands a conductor on easy and familiar terms with the folk sources Janáček drew on.

Mr. Keene's tendency to labor over every phrase (thus robbing the most dramatic moments of import), to languish in dissonance, and to plod along where the score demands rhythmic plasticity, invalidated the magic of this particular work, which consists in the juxtaposition of a starkly sober and pregnantly concise text with a music of pathos, wit, and considerable folk charm. In fact, this most modern of Janáček's works derives its power from the musical setting, which, in its subjectivity and tunefulness, so ironically compliments a dry and curt text.

The musical inadequacies of the performance, however, extended far beyond Keene's insensitivity to the score. Indeed, the tone of the evening was set in the "introduction" by a slop of violins which could only prompt one to consider whether the City Opera's musicians had a moral right to strike last year. Mr. Keene's failure to elicit from this restless band a modicum of accuracy crippled the realization of even his limited conception of how the music goes.

Most annoying, however, was Mr. Keene's decision to perform the work in the English language, a decision bound to enfeeble the work's melodic effect and undermine what little attention was given to its folk material. Janáček, an ardent nationalist, devoted considerable energy to the development of a speech melody true to the inflection of the Czech language. It is generally acknowledged that he reproduced authentically the precipitous phrasing of his own Lachian dialect. Janáček's attitude toward the performance of his work in translation is reflective of his pride in this very unusual musical accomplishment. Though he no doubt appreciated Max Brod's formidable efforts to promote his operas through the translation of his libretti into German, he nevertheless declared himself unhappy with their sound in translation. Even discounting the resentment that Janáček bore against the often repressive, "Germanizing" policies promulgated on behalf of the Habsburg emperor (a resentment which certainly would color his attitude toward the performance of his operas in the German language), one must acknowledge that integral to the beauty of his often modal melodies is their realization of Slavic speech rhythms.

One wonders what Janáček would have thought of this English translation of his libretto, credited to Yveta Synek Graff and Robert T. Jones. This listener, at least, found it intensely disturbing; in fact, it seemed to aggravate the general clumsiness with which the music was rendered. One wonders, moreover, what the purpose of the City Opera's much-touted supertitles could be, if not to facilitate the performance of an operatic work in the original tongue. To flash across the screen above the stage the words "You stupid idiot!" at the very moment they are being sung can only serve to call unwelcome attention to the condescension underlying the recent efforts to spoon feed the opera audience textual rather than musical comprehensibility.



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The City Opera's apparent literal-mindedness extended even to the program notes, which offered the peculiar assertion that "*From the House of the Dead* is unique among Janáček's mature works . . . in that it lacks . . . eroticism." There is ample eroticism in the opera for those with enough sense and sensibility to recognize it: from the homoerotic relationship of Petrovich with the sensitive Tartar boy Alyeya (the soprano role); to the two most important prisoner recountings—stories which depict intense sexual love, and no less than primal anger at the betrayal of this love. Considering the conscious reserve of the text, the rather boorish self-expression of its characters, this eroticism might be textually oblique. But it was in Janáček's power to depict it musically, and in both its tender and more brutal forms. This was the great gift he lent to the musical setting of difficult dramatic material.

Predictably, the program notes reflected both Mr. Keene's austere reading of the score and his overwrought emphasis on the dramatic text. However fashionable such emphasis has become in recent years, it seems always to work to the detriment of opera's musical content. It is not only that the opera audience is treated to ever more eccentric stagings of the classics, but that unfamiliar operas—even such musically accessible works as *From the House of the Dead* which are firmly rooted in the Central European post-romantic tradition—are not given a proper chance to find new listeners. Such stagings deflect attention from the primacy of the music, and treat the score as mere accompaniment to a theatrical spectacle.

This is not to place the profundity of Janáček's dramatic themes in doubt. Perhaps no composer so consistently dedicated himself to the exploration of issues of personal morality. Adultery, illicit love, betrayal, and the struggle between impulses and the moral demands of civilization are themes that amply occupy his work. Indeed, *From the House of the Dead* elicits double dramatic interest, since Janáček also touches here on a very relevant musical theme—the march of human suffering that is Russia's modern history.

But an opera of such exalted musical caliber deserves treatment first as musical expression; its libretto can be no more than a skeleton of the work. One must ask oneself how, indeed, such a work can conquer the opera audience and procure for itself a seat in the repertoire without having the advantage of an authentic hearing? As conceived by Christopher Keene, the City Opera production of *From the House of the Dead* may enjoy local success as a ***dramatic*** curiosity, but it will hardly help to secure this masterpiece its deserved place in the international opera repertory.

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Books

# Lincoln's generals: Sherman and Grant in their memoirs

*by James W. Tuttleton*

During a lazy summer—in which the only major cultural topic seemed to be why the NEA supports obscene art—a minor flap developed at the Grand Army Plaza, at Fifth Avenue and Central Park South, in New York City. This involved the restoration, by a coalition of benefactors working with the City Arts Commission, of an equestrian statue of General William Tecumseh Sherman. It was erected in 1903 by Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

What caused the dust-up—mostly played out in articles and letters in *The New York Times*—was the restoration of a layer of bright yellow gilding that lighted up the dingy statue like a New York City taxicab. Garish and vulgar, said some. No, said others, the new patina perfectly re-creates the effect that Saint-Gaudens was after: three layers of thin gilt against a background of green trees. Some insist that Saint-Gaudens had the color toned down before the installation of the work. Never mind, others say, New York City's polluted air will tone it down rapidly enough. Not so, according to one of the benefactors: a heavy coat of protective gelatin will cover the gold patina, which will be maintained, in perpetuity, in all its aureate splendor.

Whether the tourists in the park, or the lounging office workers on the plaza, could identify William Tecumseh Sherman—or even, for that matter, say exactly who is buried in Grant's Tomb—is anybody's guess. But with the publication of *The Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman* and *Ulysses S. Grant: Memoirs and Selected Letters*, the Library of America now offers in a convenient format two of the most important historical documents touching on the American Civil War.[1] If anyone wants to know who these superb generals were or what they accomplished as military leaders, there could be no better introduction to their lives than these two volumes. Apropos of the genre of the military memoir, each deals mainly with the historic events and the role of each general in the design of strategy and the command and deployment of Northern troops. Little enough of personal sensibility, private thought, or subjective feeling is exposed. Nevertheless, the mind and character of both men, their courage and conviction, their strengths and weaknesses, come through in these volumes, which the Library has now added to its treasury of our national literature.

William Tecumseh Sherman (1820-1891) was descended of English immigrants who arrived in 1634 and settled in Connecticut;

1 *William Tecumseh Sherman: The Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman*, edited by Charles Royster; The Library of America, 1,136 pages, $35. *Ulysses S. Grant: Memoirs and Selected Letters*, edited by Mary Drake McFeely and William S. McFeely; The Library of America, 1,199 pages, $35. The two books are also available as *Civil War Memoirs*, a special boxed set, at $70.



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the family line included many soldiers, as well as Roger Sherman, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Sherman's father Charles, a lawyer, saw an opportunity in the West and moved his family to Ohio, where William was born. (Impressed by the exploits of the great chief of the Shawnees, Charles gave his son that remarkable middle name of Tecumseh.) Sherman, in any case, grew up with a sense of the nation's history and destiny and of his family's role in it. The death of his father, by then a judge of the Ohio Supreme Court, left the family impoverished. But their standing made it possible for young Sherman to enter West Point and for his abolitionist brother Charles eventually to become a Senator from Ohio, a post he held during the Civil War.

Sherman graduated from the academy in 1840, sixth in a class of forty-three, and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. In his early career he had various military assignments: capturing and removing Florida Seminoles to the Indian Territory; conducting legal business for the Army in various parts of the South; scouting the West with the explorer General John C. Frémont; and reporting to Washington on the new gold fields in California. Because of his service in the Far West, however, Sherman missed the Mexican War campaigns, a sure route to military advancement. Thinking his army future a bleak one, he resigned his commission in 1853 and became a bank agent in California.

Later, when the bank closed in 1857, Sherman opened a law firm in Kansas, then went into farming in Ohio, and finally, in 1859, accepted the superintendency of the newly created Louisiana Seminary of Learning and Military Academy. This institution, with five instructors, sixty cadets, and no furniture, was meant to become a Southern West Point; in fact, it later evolved into Louisiana State University. During 1859-60, as the South was mobilizing for secession, Colonel Sherman advised Louisiana state officials that, in his opinion, "secession was treason, was *war*." It was therefore no surprise that, when Louisiana state militiamen seized the federal arsenal in Baton Rouge on January 10, 1861, months before the April attack on Fort Sumter that commenced the war, Sherman resigned his academic post and headed north.

Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) was born in Point Pleasant, Ohio, to a much less distinguished family. His father, who operated a tannery and sold cut wood, educated the boy at various schools and seminaries before Grant matriculated at West Point in 1839. He graduated in 1843, twenty-first in a class of 223. With the outbreak of the Mexican War, he was assigned to the command of General Zachary Taylor and fought with distinction at Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, and Monterrey. Later, under General Winfield Scott, Grant took part in the siege of Vera Cruz and Mexico City. After the war, Grant served in various parts of the country, in various commands, rising to the rank of captain. But, like Sherman, he found army pay insufficient to support his family, and he resigned his commission in 1854.

Grant's career in the 1850s, like that of Sherman, was financially problematic. He farmed for a while, sold cut wood, dabbled in real estate, and clerked in his father's leather-goods store. He had seen no future for himself in the army, but the outbreak of the Civil War enflamed his ardor for service. As he remarked in a letter to Frederick Dent on April 19, 1861,

> I know it is hard for men to apparently work with the Republican party but now all party distinctions should be lost sight of and every true patriot be for maintaining the integrity of the glorious old *Stars & Stripes*, the Constitution and the Union. The North is responding to the President's call in such a manner that the rebels may truly quaik.

Grant volunteered and was appointed commander of an Illinois regiment by Governor Richard Yates. In the first year of the war, he organized and led troops throughout Missouri, Illinois, and Kentucky.

In early 1862, Grant's genius for command emerged when his army took Fort Henry and



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Fort Donelson in the West. Unfortunately, shortly thereafter, he fell afoul of his superior, General H. W. Halleck. While Grant was on raids up the Tennessee River, to disrupt Confederate railroads, Halleck's telegrams, demanding to know his strength and whereabouts, were not delivered. Nor were Grant's dispatches to Halleck received. Consequently, Halleck told Commanding General McClellan, out of anger and perhaps jealousy, that

> he had repeatedly ordered me to give the strength of my force, but could get nothing out of me; that I had gone to Nashville, beyond the limits of my command, without his authority, and that my army was more demoralized by victory than the army at Bull Run had been by defeat. General McClellan, on this information, ordered that I should be relieved from duty and that an investigation should be made into any charges against me. He even authorized my arrest. Thus in less than two weeks after the victory at Donelson, the two leading generals in the army were in correspondence as to what disposition should be made of me, and in less than three weeks I was virtually in arrest and without a command.

Grant of course requested a transfer from Halleck's command and was disgusted enough to consider retirement, a move from which Sherman wisely dissuaded him. Shortly thereafter Halleck reinstated Grant, as winning combat officers were in short supply.

The prior military experience of Grant and Sherman before the Civil War meant that each man already knew many of the officers, Northern and Southern, who would play a major role in the conflict. Sherman had known Braxton Bragg, O. C. Ord, Halleck, P. G. T. Beauregard, and D. C. Buell, among others. Grant wrote that

> Graduating in 1843, I was at the military academy from one to four years with all cadets who graduated between 1840 and 1846—seven classes. These classes embraced more than fifty officers who afterwards became generals on one side or the other in the rebellion, many of them holding high commands. All the older officers, who became conspicuous in the rebellion, I had also served with and known in Mexico: Lee, J. E. Johnston, A. S. Johnston, Holmes, Hebért, and a number of others . . . . The acquaintance thus formed was of immense service to me in the war of the rebellion—I mean what I learned of the characters of those to whom I was afterwards opposed.

Among other things, if a large part of the country clothed R. E. Lee with "almost superhuman abilities," Grant could remark that "I had known him personally, and knew that he was mortal; and it was just as well that I felt this."

Sometimes, however, an accurate knowledge of what these generals were up against proved them too pessimistic for Washington. Although the disastrous defeat of Federal forces at Bull Run in July 1861 should have convinced Washington that this would not be a ninety-day war (the usual term of enlistment), Sherman's belief in massive recruitment for a long war went largely unheeded. And when he told General McClellan in Washington that he would need up to two hundred thousand men to clear the Confederates from Kentucky, the advice was printed in the public press and Sherman was denounced in *The Cincinnati Commercial* as "insane . . . stark mad." Northern politicians and newspapermen did not want to hear that the war would be long and costly. Thus Sherman's immediate superior, General Halleck, put Sherman on medical leave for twenty days and told McClellan that Sherman was unfit for duty. Thus, both Sherman and Grant had to contend with backstabbing by Washington politicians and by a hostile press.

Eventually reassigned to support the assault on Fort Donelson in the Cumberlands, Sherman met up with Grant and thus commenced one of the most effective one-two military combinations in this or any other war. Grant took Fort Donelson on Februrary 16, 1862, and moved immediately against Corinth and various other Confederate strongholds, preparatory to an all-out assault



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on Vicksburg, Mississippi. Vicksburg was well defended and, in terms of river geography, virtually impregnable. But, after repeated assaults, Grant, the commanding general, and Sherman, his right hand, took the city on July 4, 1863, capturing thirty thousand troops. The significance of this victory could hardly be overestimated. As Sherman put it,

> The value of the capture of Vicksburg, however, was not measured by the list of prisoners, guns, and small-arms, but by the fact that its possession secured the navigation of the great central river of the continent [the Mississippi], bisected fatally the Southern Confederacy, and set the armies which had been used in its conquest free for other purposes; and it so happened that the event coincided as to time with another great victory which crowned our arms far away, at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. That was a defensive battle, whereas ours was offensive in the highest acceptation of the term, and the two, occurring at the same moment of time, should have ended the war; but the rebel leaders were mad, and seemed determined that their people should drink of the very lowest dregs of the cup of war, which they themselves had prepared.

Perhaps the Vicksburg and Gettysburg campaigns should have ended the war, but these Southern defeats did not seem, at the time, so decisive. Confederate generals like Lee, Hood, Hardee, and their fellows had political and military resources still underestimated by the North. And the Northern victories could, just as often, have turned the other way—owing to accidents and variables that could hardly be anticipated. It is well to remember that these campaigns were fought in what would now be thought primitive conditions.

Communications, whether by messenger or telegraphy, were always problematic. Transportation was slow. Rains and the tramping feet of thirty-thousand-man armies could turn roads into a sodden quicksand of mud. Melting snows made swollen rivers unfordable. The whereabouts of the enemy was often in doubt. Often only the flashing of bayonets in the sun, in the far distance, told the generals where the enemy lay. There were long delays between the issuance of battle orders and the execution of them. Sometimes only the faraway puffs of smoke from muskets indicated the onset of hostilities. Often armies blundered into each other, without meaning to, and what seemed at first to be a mere skirmish "rose to the dignity of a full-scale battle." In fact, most of the North's successes could have been called Southern victories, except that each succeeding battle weakened Lee and his lieutenants, and it became only a matter of time before superior Northern manpower and material overwhelmed the South.

As the war dragged on, political considerations made it imperative that Lincoln remove General McClellan from overall command of the Union armies. The simple fact is that McClellan was dithering in Washington, unwilling to leave the Capital and take the field against Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. But even Halleck, who replaced McClellan, was not decisive enough. Both Grant and Sherman, who evince no love for Halleck in their memoirs, regarded him as timid. Hence, the successes of the Western armies, under Grant, induced Congress to revive the rank of lieutenant-general—for the sole purpose of making Grant the highest-ranking officer in the army and therefore inevitably Halleck's replacement. Grant was made general-in-chief on March 10, 1864. On the eve of his departure for Washington he wrote to Sherman:

> While I have been eminently successful in this War, in at least gaining the confidence of the public, no one feels more than me how much of this success is due to the energy, skill, and harmonious putting forth of that energy and skill, of those who it has been my good furtune to have occupying a subordinate position under me. There are many officers to whom these remarks are applicable to a greater or less degree, proportionate to their ability as soldiers, but what I want is to express my thanks to you



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> and McPherson as *the men* to whom, above all others, I feel indebted for whatever I have had of success. How far your advice and suggestions have been of assistance you know. How far your execution of whatever has been given you to do entitles you to the reward I am receiving you cannot know as well as me. I feel all the gratitude this letter would express, giving it the most flattering construction.

General James B. McPherson was killed in the Battle of Atlanta in July of 1864.

Sherman warned Grant against trying to command the Union armies from a base in Washington, urging him to remain in the West so as to avoid the politicians, spies, and hostile newspapermen. But Grant's reading of the military situation led him to take command of the Washington-based Army of the Potomac, so as to defeat Lee. He gave the West to Sherman, who was ordered to assault the armies of Confederate generals Johnston, Hood, and Hardee. This plan Grant kept secret from the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, and President Lincoln. In the prosecution of this plan, Grant ordered Sherman to attack Hood, who withdrew into Atlanta. Sherman assaulted the city and took it on September 2, 1864. He evacuated it of civilians, largely burned it, and made it forever after unfit to support a Confederate army.

Sherman's order that all civilians evacuate Atlanta outraged Southern politicians and newspapermen. Confederate General J. B. Hood told Sherman that "the unprecedented measure you propose transcends, in studied and ingenious cruelty, all acts ever before brought to my attention in the dark history of war." But in driving women and children out of Atlanta and sacking the city, Sherman was merely following a policy Grant had determined on. After the Battle of Shiloh, Grant had given up any idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest. This necessarily involved the confiscation or destruction of whatever supported the Southern war machine. Atlanta was full of factories, munitions plants, and storehouses for the Confederate armies. Thus Sherman proceeded to lay it waste with Grant's approval. In responding to General Hood, Sherman pointed out that Southern commanders had frequently evacuated Unionist civilians and burned their houses and property. And he went on:

> I say that it is kindness to these families of Atlanta to remove them now, at once, from scenes that women and children should not be exposed to, and the "brave people" should scorn to commit their wives and children to the rude barbarians who thus, as you say, violate the laws of war, as illustrated in the pages of its dark history.
>
> In the name of common-sense, I ask you not to appeal to a just God in such a sacrilegious manner. You who, in the midst of peace and prosperity, have plunged a nation into war—dark and cruel war—who dared and badgered us to battle, insulted our flag, seized our arsenals and forts that were left in the honorable custody of peaceful ordnance-sergeants, seized and made "prisoners of war" the very garrisons sent to protect your people against negroes and Indians, long before any overt act was committed by the (to you) hated Lincoln Government; tried to force Kentucky and Missouri into rebellion, [in] spite of themselves; falsified the vote of Louisiana; turned loose your privateers to plunder unarmed ships; expelled Union families by the thousands, burned their houses, and declared, by an act of your Congress, the confiscation of all debts due Northern men for goods had and received! Talk thus to the marines, but not to me, who have seen these things . . .

Such tactics led Sherman to be called the first "modern" general, one for whom war was an all-out enterprise of destruction. But these generals produced other novelties. Military strategy, prior to Grant, largely favored the constant protection of an army's rearguard, of the lifeline that supplied the food, ammunition, and forage needed for an army's survival. Much of military history is therefore a repetitious record of flanking and encircling movements to cut off an enemy's supply line, the destruction of roads and rail-



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roads, the burning of supply wagons, ammunition trains, and provisions. These memoirs are no different in that respect. Yet Grant had learned through his victory at Fort Donelson that his army could subsist off provisions taken from the land traversed.

Consequently, Grant and Sherman devised an unheard-of plan, according to which Sherman would strike out eastward from Atlanta, living off the crops and livestock of Georgia and the Carolinas. His destination—Savannah, Charleston, Raleigh, Wilmington?—would be a secret, even from Washington, so there could be no doubt about the confusing effects of his movement. Neither Lee nor the Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston was in a position to stop him as Sherman swung eastward. Eventually, of course, Sherman intended to come up through the Carolinas into Virginia, to get behind Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, and combine with Grant to crush them.

Sherman's "March to the Sea" was one of the most controversial strategies of the Civil War, inasmuch as his army of sixty-five thousand men, marching in a sixty-mile swath, traversed 425 miles from Atlanta to Goldsboro, North Carolina, devastating farmlands and cities along the way. Southern newspapers and politicians raged at Sherman as an infamous barbarian who had "changed the rules of war." Sherman's memoirs defend his army's conduct and the policy on which it was based, but there can be no doubt that the consequences for the South were vastly destructive. But as Sherman had told the Mayor of Atlanta, "You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will. War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it." (Sherman is perhaps best remembered for two sayings. To prevent the Republicans from nominating him for the presidency, he told them in 1884, "I will not accept if nominated and will not serve if elected." The other saying is "War is hell." What he actually said, on the occasion of a veterans' reunion in 1880, was this: "There is many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but, boys, it is all hell.")

In any case, the "March to the Sea" worked. As Grant moved toward and besieged Richmond, the Confederate capital, Lee was faced with a dilemma: to stand and fight Grant's army or to withdraw southward, link up with Joseph Johnston's troops, intercept Sherman, and try to defeat his army. During this phase of operations Lee was simply brilliant in devising maneuvers and attacks that kept Grant's army off balance. But with every skirmish, every battle, even if victorious, Lee lost men and material that would make defeat only a matter of time. As the siege of Richmond continued, many Southern troops became demoralized and deserted. Lee hesitated, suffered serious losses of supplies from the rear, then withdrew from Richmond. The evacuation of the city produced chaos, as Lee's army seemed to disappear. But General Phil Sheridan sent Grant a dispatch indicating that

> the whole of Lee's army is at or near Amelia Court House, and on this side of it. General Davies, whom I sent out to Painesville on their right flank, has just captured six pieces of artillery and some wagons. We can capture the Army of Northern Virginia if force enough can be thrown to this point, and then advance upon it. My cavalry was at Burkesville yesterday, and six miles beyond, on the Danville Road, last night. General Lee is at Amelia Court House in person. They are out of rations, or nearly so. They were advancing up the railroad towards Burkesville yesterday, when we intercepted them at this point.

Grant had heard before that Bobby Lee was in a trap, but he personally rode forward to the site of the encampment, reconnoitered the positions, and deployed the troops so as to engage Lee and prevent him from escaping southward to join forces with Johnston.

This was to be the great battle, the final showdown between them that would perhaps settle the fate of the Union—and perhaps of Grant himself. As he rode back and forth, consulting his division commanders as



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to placement and strategy, Grant was largely unprepared for the note he received from Lee, in early April 1865, proposing a discussion of the surrender of his army. But they agreed to meet at the nearby town of Appomattox Court House. Lee, according to Grant, appeared "in a full uniform which was entirely new, and was wearing a sword of considerable value." Grant, on the other hand, had not expected the capitulation and appeared in a private's uniform, spattered from his riding through the lines, absent a sword, with only the shoulder straps of a lieutenant general to indicate his rank. (Of course, his enemies said that he had once again been drinking; but modern historians have cast doubt on Grant's legendary bibulations.) Of the scene of Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Grant later wrote that

> What General Lee's feelings were I do not know. As he was a man of much dignity, with an impassible face, it was impossible to say whether he felt inwardly glad that the end had finally come, or felt sad over the result, and was too manly to show it. Whatever his feelings, they were entirely concealed from my observation; but my own feelings, which had been quite jubilant on the receipt of his letter, were sad and depressed. I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse.

Grant's surrender terms were generous, as befitting Lincoln's wish to bind up the wounds of war, and Lee's men were sent home with their horses to begin the spring planting.

The surrender of R. E. Lee found Sherman moving up through North Carolina, and he was immediately redirected to find the Confederate army of Joe Johnston and destroy it. But Johnston knew the end was at hand and moved to surrender. In view of Sherman's reputation for merciless punition, the tentative terms he offered him, though submitted to Washington for approval, were immediately denounced by President Andrew Johnson and Secretary Stanton (Lincoln had just been assassinated). Sherman was ordered to offer only what Grant had offered Lee. Stanton broadcast Sherman's overgenerous blunder and insinuations were made about his loyalty to the Union. This seems incredible today, but such were the passions of war and of political preferment that for some weeks Sherman's reputation was under a cloud. Grant and other defenders eventually redeemed it, but Stanton was ever thereafter an enemy of Sherman. Later, of course, Grant went on to become President, a task for which he was largely unfitted, and Sherman followed him as commanding general of all the armies.

The style of these two memoirs is better than we have a right to expect, coming as they do from two such men of action. Both works detail at great length the relentless sequence of skirmishes, battles, sieges, and other engagements. Both volumes illustrate the text with copies of battlefield orders, maps, command rosters, body counts, and the like. Sherman's record is perhaps the livelier of the two, expressing certainty, self-confidence, and *joie de vivre*. Yet there is a particular modesty in Sherman's memoir. He does not tell us, for example, what Grant remarks about Sherman's conduct at the Battle of Shiloh:

> A casualty to Sherman that would have taken him from the field that day would have been a sad one for the troops engaged at Shiloh. And how near we came to this! On the 6th [of April, 1862] Sherman was shot twice, once in the hand, once in the shoulder, the ball cutting his coat and making a slight wound, and a third ball passed through his hat. In addition to this he had several horses shot during the day.

Of the two books, Grant's is the better. In fact, it holds its own with every other military history written by a commanding general, going back to Caesar's Gallic wars, so far as I have read them. Matthew Arnold sniffed at Grant's bad grammar, nearly driving Mark



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Twain wild, for Twain had arranged the book's publication. But Edmund Wilson was more nearly right in praising the *Memoirs* as a striking instance of the transition from a flowery Victorian style into a style of direct, straightforward realism. Perhaps no passage will illustrate this style more clearly than Grant's account of the Battle of the Wilderness, fought in May of 1864:

> At 4:15 in the afternoon Lee attacked our left. His line moved up to within a hundred yards of ours and opened a heavy fire. This status was maintained for about half an hour. Then a part of Mott's division and Ward's brigade of Birney's division gave way and retired in disorder. The enemy under R. H. Anderson took advantage of this and pushed through our line, planting their flags on a part of the intrenchments not on fire. But owing to the efforts of Hancock, their success was but temporary. Carroll, of Gibbon's division, moved at a double quick with his brigade and drove back the enemy, inflicting great loss. Fighting had continued from five in the morning sometimes along the whole line, at other times only in places. The ground fought over had varied in width, but averaged three-quarters of a mile. The killed, and many of the severely wounded, of both armies, lay within this belt where it was impossible to reach them. The woods were set on fire by the bursting shells, and the conflagration raged. The wounded who had not strength to move themselves were either suffocated or burned to death. Finally the fire communicated with our breastworks, in places. Being constructed of wood, they burned with great fury. But the battle still raged, our men firing through the flames until it become too hot to remain longer.

Grant would probably never have written these memoirs had not disastrous investments threatened to ruin his family. They were completed as he was dying, facing the specter of bankruptcy, and show, toward the end, traces of his fatigue. But the work remains an essential record of Union military history. He died in 1885, shortly after completing it, and was eventually interred north of the Grand Army Plaza, in a marble tomb overlooking the Hudson River. William Tecumseh Sherman died six years later. At his funeral procession in New York City, attended by President Harrison and former presidents Hayes and Cleveland, one of the pallbearers was former Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston. The weather was bitterly cold. Although eighty-four years old, General Johnston refused to cover his head, as a mark of respect for Sherman, his old foe. A month later Johnston died of pneumonia. Sherman was buried in St. Louis, at the Calvary Cemetery, near his family.

# A Balanchine creation

*Suzanne Farrell, with Toni Bentley*
Holding on to the Air: An Autobiography; Summit, 322 pages, $19.95

*reviewed by Moira Hodgson*

George Balanchine's *Don Quixote*, as originally produced in 1965 by the New York City Ballet, saw the sixty-one-year-old choreographer in the title role, with the part of Dulcinea danced by a nineteen-year-old soloist named Suzanne Farrell, who at the time had onty been two y,ars with the company. The three-act ballet, complete with story-line and dance divertissements to a score by Nicolas Nabokov, was seen as quite a departure for the master of complex, plotless works to music by Stravinsky. It was generally speculated that the ballet was in itself a quixotic venture, a statement of the hopeless adoration the aging Balanchine felt for his young ballerina.

Farrell's autobiography, *Holding on to the Air*, written with Toni Bentley (a dancer and the author of *Winter Season*, an account of life backstage at the New York City Ballet in 1980), is interesting primarily for what it has to say about Balanchine. After the premiere of *Don Quixote*, which Farrell says brought them together—"I have often thought that was the ballet's real purpose"—the couple's relationship began to attract public atten-



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tion. It was generally assumed that Farrell would be the next in Balanchine's long line of ballerina-wives and mistresses, including Tamara Geva, Alexandra Danilova, Vera Zorina, Maria Tallchief, and Tanaquil LeClerq. Instead, just over three years later at the beginning of 1969 (soon after Balanchine got his divorce from LeClerq), Farrell suddenly married Paul Mejia, a young dancer also in the New York City Ballet, and the two of them were thrown out of the company. Farrell went to Europe where for the next six years she and her husband worked with Maurice Béjart, a showman whose works were the antithesis of the sort of ballets she had been dancing. In the summer of 1975, she was floundering artistically and wrote to Balanchine and asked him to take her back into the company. He did, but without her husband.

Farrell's book does not provide any startling insights into the enigmatic character of Balanchine and it is unclear what really happened between them, or why she precipitated such a drastic split. A girl/child who at the age of sixteen could perform Stravinsky's *Movements for Piano and Orchestra* but had never heard of the Beatles, she sometimes seems to have been too naïve to be true. If Balanchine liked his muses young and unformed, he could not have found raw material better suited for the job.

As a dancer Farrell was unquestionably Balanchine's creation. She was virtually unable to function artistically on her own. But what is surprising is to learn from her book how strong an influence she had on him and to what extent their work was a collaboration. Apart from ballet, they can't have had much to talk about to each other, but in the studio the uneducated teenager from Cincinnati and the cultivated, worldly, much older man communicated in an extraordinary way. "I knew that when I was dancing we were on the same level, that we spoke a language of music, movements, and emotion that was the same; but when it came to life offstage, I often wondered why he wanted to be with me. I was still an unsophisticated girl from the Midwest with little conversation aside from ballet, while he was a man of enormous culture and education."

Like many great artists before him, Balanchine could not separate his work from his romantic life. As Farrell writes, "His history of marrying his leading dancer of the moment indicates that for him there was no rational separation between work and personal intimacy—his life was his work and his work his life." It was a way of "temporarily securing what was as necessary to him as air—and just as intangible. He often explained why he liked to marry his ballerinas—'If you marry a dancer you always know where she is—in the studio working.'"

Farrell was probably the most important dancer in Balanchine's life. She not only influenced his choreography, she had a dramatic impact on the look and style of the company. (This was not always to the good, since some of the dancers, desperate to show Balanchine that they too could throw themselves off balance into deep penchés and dance with limp wrists, came to look like flailing caricatures of her.)

One of the reasons Farrell interested Balanchine so much—and why she ended up in more of his ballets than anyone else—was because she was not, like many dancers, interested in classifying herself as a type. She didn't try to make the most of her strengths and fashion herself into a lyrical dancer, a soubrette, or a bravura technician. She did anything he wanted. As Balanchine once told Diana Adams, "she never resisted."

Farrell's ability to do everything he asked of her allowed him the freedom to create and to see things as he worked, which inevitably lead them to unexplored areas. "We were both taking pretty big chances, but if he thought I could do something, I would believe him, often against my own reasoning. I trusted him not to let me be a fool but rather a tool, an instrument in his hand. In short, I trusted him with my life." But after *Don Quixote*, she says, the basic dynamic of their relationship had changed; "he was no longer leading me—he saw me leading him."

When she learned Balanchine's steps to



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Stravinsky's *Movements*, she discovered that the music made sense because "I . . . let my body ride the waves. If I had had to stop and think, I wouldn't have danced a step." One day Balanchine asked Farrell for an impossibly deep fourth to start a pirouette and she complied without a murmur. The result was a whole new way for her of turning. "That pirouette was really the beginning of our spiritual understanding; indeed, it was not about pirouettes at all, it was about believing in someone even when you might doubt."

Farrell's famous off-balance movement, which became one of her signatures, was developed in rehearsals of *Don Quixote*. "I was unafraid of falling—which was crucial for this kind of attack—and as I scrambled to regain my 'center' Balanchine became intrigued watching my various recovery techniques. . . . He found square, proper, academic dancing 'boring as hell' and one day as I fell out of a turn into a backbend lunge he said, 'Can you do that again, can you fall more . . . lean more . . . bend more?'" The fact that Farrell, a devout Catholic who never got over her parents' divorce, would not consummate her relationship with Balanchine seems to have intensified the creative bond between them. In the studio she was ready to risk all and demonstrate a self-abandon that she did not possess in their personal life together. "Our unique relationship had proved itself so often to both of us, and it might not have withstood consummation. Because I couldn't give George everything he wanted, I became committed to making it up to him in some way."

Physically Farrell represented the ultimate in Balanchine's idea of the perfect female dancer—tall and commanding, yet feminine, alluring, and mysterious. And perhaps because she was ultimately unattainable, she brought out an emotional side of the choreographer that had been largely unexplored. "It's all in the programs," Balanchine once said. For her he choreographed some of his most romantic works, beginning in 1963 with *Meditation*, part of which she danced with her hair down (no one else ever danced Farrell's role). She was the lost love of Jacques d'Amboise, who had been instructed by Balanchine to put a little gray in his hair. One of Balanchine's last works for her, created a year before his death in 1982 at the age of seventy-seven, was the "Preghiera" movement of *Mozartiana*. It was his last great ballet, which she danced in a somber black tutu.

Last November, after twenty years and twenty ballets choreographed for her by Balanchine, Farrell retired from the New York City Ballet. For her he had created the adagio of the "Diamonds" section of *Jewels*, Stravinsky's *Variations*, Schumann's *Davidsbündlertänze*, the Strauss waltzes from *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Chaconne* (to Gluck's ballet music from *Orfeo et Euridice*), Ravel's *Tzigane*, and the gypsy rondo of *Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet*. Farrell's book is a moving recollection of the workings of the man with whom, as she puts it, she started "breaking the rules at the very first rehearsal." It reveals the pivotal role their extraordinary relationship played in the history of ballet.

# Losing faith

*Robert Hessen, editor* Breaking with Communism: The Intellectual Odyssey of Bertram D. Wolfe. Hoover Institution Press, 311 pages, $24.95; $18.95 paper

*reviewed by Paul Hollander*

Although Communist systems have lately been collapsing at an unexpected rate, the specter of Communism will continue to haunt us—if no longer as a threat, then as the sum of painful memories and as one of the great mysteries and tragedies of our century. There are several questions one must ponder in order to learn anything from the history of Communism or from the spectacular blunders and bizarre misjudgments of individuals—many of them talented, creative, and full of good will—who were drawn to Communist systems and movements.



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How did political systems so thoroughly lacking in popular support and legitimacy manage to perpetuate themselves for so long? What mixture of idealism, commitment, opportunism, and fear motivated those who propped up the authorities? How important were individual leaders—such as Castro, Mao, Stalin, etc.—in perpetuating these systems? Did the most committed members of the elite waver or persist in their beliefs until the last moment, when they were swept away, as in Eastern Europe during 1989? If they too lost their faith, what precisely led to this?

One must also ask why Communist systems, in all their various incarnations, exercised such a strong attraction for those who did not live under them and had no tangible, interest-bound reason to support them. What especially needs explaining is how *successive generations* of educated and well-meaning Westerners were capable of idealizing and admiring political systems that, after all, were quite similar to one another in their oppressive qualities and that were regularly discredited by the massive outflow of their own discontented citizens. In other words, the truly puzzling question is why a susceptibility toward Communist systems—which kept turning out to be repressive, inhumane, and mendacious—so tenaciously survived.

Some answers to these questions may be found in the reflections of those who traveled the road from commitment to disillusionment and who, in traversing this difficult terrain, survived intact the loss of faith. The failure of the Soviet-Communist god has been quite thoroughly explored by a long line of Western authors from Emma Goldman to Leon Trotsky and Bertrand Russell, from Arthur Koestler to Ignazio Silone and their colleagues who gave us the volume *The God That Failed*, and by latter-day supporters who were released from their thrall by Khrushchev's revelations at the Twentieth Party Congress. Their accounts of their resistance to and grappling with the loss of faith offer the best hope for understanding why the systems and ideals in question were so attractive, why breaking with them is so difficult, and why, consequently, many have been tempted to find, time and again, substitutes for the discarded ideals.

Bertram D. Wolfe (1896-1977) has been among the great figures of Western intellectual-political history who, after a long period of active commitment to Communist ideals and practices (embodied at the time in the Soviet Union), broke with both the Communist movement and its ideology. Perhaps best known for his classic *Three Who Made a Revolution* (1948), Wolfe was a prolific author whose nearly twenty books included many volumes on Communism and a posthumously published autobiography, *A Life in Two Centuries* (1981), which provides a chronicle of Wolfe's life through the 1930s. After repudiating Communism, Wolfe became, and remained until his death at age eighty-one, one of the most knowledgeable and authentic American interpreters of Marxism and the Soviet political system.

The posthumous collection of his writings entitled *Breaking With Communism* consists of a selection of his letters written between 1938 and 1976 and his Voice of America scripts, produced between 1951 and 1954, analyzing substantive issues having to do with Soviet affairs. The letters are addressed to a variety of public figures, scholars, and politicians including presidents Ford, Kennedy, Nixon, and Reagan; senators Henry Jackson, Humphrey, and Taft; Mexican president Escheverria; American Communist leader Jay Lovestone; and authors such as Pearl Buck, William F. Buckley, Stephen F. Cohen, James T. Farrell, Leopold Labedz, Eugene Lyon, Kenneth Rexroth, Boris Souvarine, Manes Sperber, Edmund Wilson, and Karl Wittfogel. These lucid commentaries and lively polemics help answer some of the questions raised earlier, and they provide further examples of Wolfe's superb understanding of Communist theory and practice alike. In putting together this collection, Robert Hessen of the Hoover Institution has also provided a documentary for the second half of Wolfe's life, taking up where *A Life in Two Centuries* left off.



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In 1919, Wolfe became one of the founders of the Communist Party of the United States, and subsequently was a dedicated supporter of the Soviet Union. He began, as Dr. Hessen points out in his informative introduction, by "comparing Lenin's professed ideals with the worst flaws of the United States"—a procedure still characteristic of American supporters of Communist systems. His early critiques of the United States were no different from those put forward by present day social critics: he deplored inequality, an uncaring society, and the conflict between high ideals and sordid realities; he despaired of poverty and lack of brotherhood, and abhorred dog-eat-dog capitalism.

Between 1919 and 1929, Wolfe was active in the Communist movements of both the United States and Mexico. He was also a Communist candidate for both the New York State Assembly (in 1919) and the U.S. Congress (in 1920), though the voters of Brooklyn did not elect him. During the 1920s, he made several visits to the Soviet Union, where he attended meetings of the Communist International. In 1929 the Comintern (that is, Stalin) severely rebuked the U.S. Communist Party for its alleged factionalism and sought to strip it of "any illusion of independence or self-direction." Such denial of autonomy for a national Communist party and the heavy-handed Soviet methods to accomplish it were apparently the first blow to Wolfe's pro-Soviet beliefs. Complete disillusionment was a gradual process and took several more years. Eventually, Wolfe was expelled from the Communist Party, after which he aligned himself with Jay Lovestone and his faction.

The next, decisive stage in distancing himself from the Soviet-Communist cause came in 1938 during the Purge trials. The notorious frame-up of Bukharin was something that particularly outraged him. He still refrained from repudiating Communism, though, contenting himself with condemning "its perversion by Stalin"—this being another strategy practiced by latter-day leftists. Next came the questioning of Lenin and his authoritarianism in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and the recognition of continuity between him and Stalin. Some years later Wolfe finally rejected Marxism, too, as he traced Lenin's intolerance to Marx's dogmatism. During World War II, when wartime alliances predisposed Americans to absurdly rosy beliefs about the Soviet system, Wolfe was among the few critics of Moscow and suffered for it. He spent the rest of his life writing books and articles that examined aspects of the Soviet system and Marxism-Leninism and that sought to inform Western audiences about their true character. At a time when Communist systems in the Third World became fashionable in the United States, he recognized their moral and institutional kinship with the Soviet model. During the 1960s and 1970s, when anti-anti-Communism became a reigning attitude—if not an explicit ideology—among many American intellectuals, he was often assailed by a sense of hopelessness. He felt, not without reason, that he was swimming against powerful currents of public and intellectual opinion.

Wolfe's observations bolster the idea that there are few if any significant differences between the intellectual predisposition of those who in the 1930s found the Soviet system heartwarmingly humane and those who half a century later were irresistibly drawn to charismatic Castro or cozy Communist Nicaragua and its authentic peasants. This has been the case not because the Soviet Union in the 1930s and Cuba or Nicaragua in the 1980s were similar countries but because the needs and wishes of the two sets of supporters were similar. As Wolfe put it in a letter written in 1967 to a Jesuit priest enamored with the "young Marx," "As men of good will, you are peculiarly eager to deceive yourself"—an observation further vindicated by the clergy's flirtation with "liberation theology" and its recurring delusion that there is an affinity between Marxism and Christianity.

Wolfe has also durably identified the characteristic attitudes of fellow travelers in



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his 1944 correspondence with Anna Melissa Graves, a Quaker author of a book on the Soviet Union. Like others producing such travelogues, Miss Graves was prone "to generalize too far from . . . limited experience." Thus she presumed that, because she did not observe religious persecution in the course of her visit, religious freedoms were fully respected in the Soviet Union. Wolfe also pinpointed another attitude that recurs with monotonous regularity in each generation of Communist sympathizers: "The real trouble, I have come to feel, is that you are not opposed to evil on principle, but only to evil when it comes from your pet source of grievance, the peculiar inverted nationalism which sees the evil thing only when your own country does it." This is another observation that brings to mind Miss Graves's colleagues in the American Friends Service Committee today as they either steadfastly avert their eyes from the massive human rights violations in their favorite Third World dictatorships or else manage to find ways to blame the West for them. In 1952, commenting on a book of the British Quaker Paul Cadbury, Wolfe wrote to Norman Thomas that "The great Quakers of the nineteenth century would be shocked . . . that one who spoke in their name could lecture on the Soviet Union without saying one word on the new slavery. . . . Mr. Cadbury's address . . . is a determined 'Christian' attempt to 'understand' the rulers and not the ruled, the slave drivers and not the slaves . . ."

Such selective attempts at "understanding" have remained central to the attitudes of the sympathizers to this day; they appear in combination with a moral absolutism reserved for Western societies and a moral relativism that allows one to take a more charitable view of the flaws of the Communist systems in question. Wolfe's gentle polemics help us understand the extent to which there are important similarities between the motives and attitudes of those belonging to the Old and the New Left.

Although primarily a student of Soviet affairs, Wolfe did not flinch from criticizing New Left extremists such as Bruce Franklin and Angela Davis, whom he observed at Stanford. The critical comments he made in 1970 on Miss Davis's qualifications to teach philosophy remain relevant now not only because she has been doing exactly what he expected her to do, but also because her approach to teaching (including, in Wolfe's words, her frequent use of "lethal and mind-deadening slogans") has gained wide acceptance on campuses across the country as university curricula have become increasingly politicized.

These writings also remind us that political sanity requires the capacity to make distinctions, a capacity fellow travelers lose as they are carried away on the tide of moral indignation against the evils of their own society. They have little specific knowledge of and interest in the comparative magnitude of these evils since they automatically assume that no system can be more unjust or inhumane than their own. Wolfe was well aware of this tendency when he disputed (in 1971) the propriety of calling a person jailed for violating drug laws in the United States a "political prisoner." In doing so he also touched on another perverse and destructive tendency that has been with us since the 1960s, namely, the predilection to expand the meaning of the concept of "political" to cover a wide range of attitudes and activities which have little or nothing to do with politics as the concept has been generally used and understood. He wrote that

> it is impossible for me to regard the smoker in prison as a "political prisoner" as your circular letter suggests or to have any connection with the slogan peace and power which your letter also invokes. . . . Smoking pot neither makes one a political prisoner, nor does it involve peace and power. Smoking pot is not a political act.

Wolfe was of course also aware that in truly repressive political systems many aspects of life are subordinated to politics and that the authorities deliberately seek to blur the line between the political and non-political, between the public and private, in order to



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expand their control over the lives of their citizens. In the West those who eagerly attach the label "political" to aspects of life not usually regarded as such are engaged in a different enterprise. They are seeking new grounds for enlarging their critiques of society; if everything frustrating, depriving, or problematic is labeled "political," then one can easily reject the institutions and values of society *tout court,* substituting self-righteous anger for individual responsibility.

While Wolfe's reflections help us understand the mentality of estranged social critics of various generations—as well as the connection between such estrangement and reverence for political systems presumed to be superior to those in the West—his writings are of limited use for understanding some of the more recent manifestations of the Communist ethos. Yet we must remember that at the time Wolfe became disenchanted with the Soviet system (and Western Communist movements servile to it), it was the only such system in the world. Consequently, it was easier to see the Soviet Union as a unique, progressive country when it was the first such society and when evidence of its monumental failures was only beginning to accumulate. Moreover—and for the same reason—it would seem that disenchantment would have been more strenuously resisted by the committed. In fact, pro-Soviet attitudes vanished more thoroughly than similar sentiments associated with putatively socialist Third World dictatorships of more recent vintage; the latter seem to have had wider, if shallower, support and linger on as only small numbers of former adherents seem willing to make a clean break.

Perhaps the pro-Soviet attitudes of the 1930s were more of an elite (and sectarian) phenomenon whereas the newer varieties of leftism, "Third Worldism," and fellow traveling represent more widespread, if more superficial commitments less important to confront and exorcise. This possibility is further suggested by the ease with which more recent political sympathies are transferred from one country or setting to another: from the Soviet Union to China, from China to Cuba (or vice versa), from Vietnam to Grenada or Nicaragua, or the PLO, or ANC, or from any specific country or movement to the more diffuse entity of the Third World. These sympathies survive, even if in an attenuated form, because they are upheld by large numbers of mutually supportive people in fairly cohesive (usually campus-based) subcultures which earlier generations of fellow travelers did not share.

Wolfe's case also confirms patterns discerned in other instances of political disenchantment. Western idealists first tend to project certain amorphous hopes upon a particular Communist system that promises to realize or pursue their political ideals with more determination than their own society. Wolfe began by thinking that the Soviet Union was a force for peace as World War I was coming to an end; for him (as for many of his peers), the Soviet Union also "seemed to be the first country that would institutionalize the ideals of the eighteenth century," as Dr. Hessen puts it.

In some ways, such political infatuations are reminiscent of romantic infatuation, which also involves the wholesale projection of idealized qualities. As long as the enamored person does not discern too much of a discrepancy between the ideal and the reality of the beloved, the involvement persists. Distance and obstacles to consummating the relationship help, as the distance between the Western admirer and the country he chooses to admire helps to perpetuate his illusions. As evidence accumulates suggesting that the person (or the political system) fails to live up to the ideal, disenchantment begins to set in—though it is usually resisted as the emotionally involved person seeks to rationalize the discrepancies between the ideal and reality. Wolfe wrote: "I longed to retain some shred of my old ideals and beliefs, longed to believe that I did not have to write off the spiritual investment of *a decade* as a total loss." It must be conceded that in personal relationships abrupt, dramatic breaks are more common than in political



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involvements, which tend to be drawn out and in the course of which strenuous efforts are made to explain away the discrepancies between theory and practice. Perhaps the most fascinating question, the one most dependent on the elusive nuances of personality and individual psychology, is what particular event or experience is the final straw that demolishes a commitment already weakened by a series of disappointments? It is by no means a rational or predictable process, and not one necessarily related to the volume of disillusioning experience.

It is regrettable that Bertram Wolfe did not live to see the unraveling of the Soviet empire and its massive public rejection by its people. While he was among many who did not anticipate these developments, the anti-Communist outlook, to which he made a durable and learned contribution, has been fully vindicated by these events.

## Anti-Anglo attitudes

*Christopher Hitchens* Blood, Class, and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 398 pages, $22.95

*reviewed by Paul Johnson*

This little book can be succinctly described as a hostile account of the Anglo-American "special relationship." It claims to deal in ironies. But it has missed some. For example, one of the curious things about the special relationship between Britain and the United States today is that it is far more often referred to by its left-wing opponents than by its supporters. Indeed, they are obsessed by it, especially in Britain. (Americans care much less, one way or the other.) I don't think I have ever heard Mrs. Thatcher speak of the special relationship, except once or twice for public consumption. But her critics on the Left are always bringing it up and using as a stick to beat her: it is dead, finished; she is "clinging to an outmoded concept," "indulging in hopeless nostalgia for a vanished past," etc. Left-wing journals like the *Guardian* regularly announce its demise, every six months. But if it is extinct, why do they go on about it? If it is, as the British journalist Christopher Hitchens argues, something to be ridiculed, why does he think it worth a book?

That brings us to a second irony. Whether the old special relationship still functions or not, there is certainly a new one, which has come into existence in recent decades, and Hitchens is a member of it. It is a special relationship of American and British writers who hate the West in general, and its two principal components in particular. Some are academics. Some are journalists. All are transatlantic commuters. They swap anti-Reagan and anti-Thatcher jokes at international gatherings, write for each other's magazines, praise each other's books, award each other fellowships and prizes. Some are more anti-American than anti-British, others the reverse. But all use "Anglo-Saxon" as a term of abuse, all have the itch to swat a WASP. They control certain areas of academic and media power and usually do quite well for themselves. But times are not always easy.

Hitchens played the shadow special-relationship game from the London end for some years. He did not hit any jackpots, but did establish himself as what might be called a left-wing odd-job man. By temperament he tends to be more anti-British than anti-American, however, and in London the reverse is more remunerative. For this and other reasons, he has found it more convenient in recent years to operate primarily from the western end of the Atlantic, where he has been notably successful pursuing a career as a fashionable left-wing pundit. He regularly pontificates on political subjects in magazines like *The Nation* (thus keeping his left-wing *bona fides* in good order), while dishing up assorted bits of right-thinking cultural chitchat for glossy fashion outlets like *HG* and *The Tatler* (thus assuring his ticket to the beau monde). *Blood, Class, and Nostalgia* belongs to the solemnly left-wing side of Hitchens's production. Presenting



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Britain as the senior, corrupting partner in a story of Anglo-American skullduggery, it is a natural result of what I suppose we must call (yet another irony) Hitchens's intellectual sojourn.

The book seems to have been hastily put together and shows few signs of serious historical study. Various episodes in Anglo-American relations are dealt with in an anecdotal manner, but there is little attempt at systematic treatment of how the special relationship developed or how it came into existence in the first place. The War of 1812 gets only two brief references, and Hitchens's ill-informed aside about the burning of Washington suggests to me that he knows very little about it. Yet it was from this unfortunate war, the Treaty of Ghent that ended it, and the subsequent agreements about the Canadian frontier and the demilitarization of the Great Lakes, that a pragmatic Anglo-American understanding first emerged.

The notion that Britain and the United States were not "foreign" nations to each other, but something different and closer, was not, as Hitchens seems to suggest, a conspiracy between two elites. It would be hard to conjure up a more intense dislike and suspicion than existed between, say, Monroe, John Quincy Adams, and Andrew Jackson on the one hand, and Castlereagh, Canning, and Wellington on the other. It was, rather, a popular emotion, quite spontaneous in origin, based on common sense and shared feelings, spreading upwards; only much later did the elites begin to reflect it. But all this Hitchens ignores: it would not fit in with his preconceived themes or give him the book he wants.

In the event, what he gives us is some material about Admiral Mahan, the historian of naval power, something about the Adams family, and good deal about Churchill and Roosevelt. There is a section on Churchill's staunch ally Ronald Tree—whom Hitchens sneeringly describes as "the acme of Anglo-American gentry"—and his house, Ditchley in Oxfordshire, which Churchill requisitioned occasionally during World War II. Hitchens also includes sundry pompous reflections on military intelligence and nuclear power, but has virtually nothing to say about Canada, without which the origins and nature of the special relationship between the United States and Britain cannot be understood. He is also wholly inadequate on the Middle East, a part of the world that once divided Britain and the United States but now helps keep them together, as events have shown since the publication of this book.

I have called this book "little," though in fact it runs nearly four hundred pages. But much of it is padding. At a rough guess I would say that a quarter of the book consists of quotations. Indeed, the quotations include the one really interesting section. Hitchens reproduces "The Burden of Jerusalem" and "A Chapter of Proverbs," two little-known poems by Kipling (who is now out of copyright) which Winston Churchill sent privately to Roosevelt in October 1943. According to Churchill's letter, after Kipling's death "Mrs. Kipling decided not to publish them in case they should lead to controversy and it is therefore important that their existence should not become known and that there should be no public reference to this gift."

Hitchens claims that neither poem "has yet appeared in any anthology of Kipling's work" and that he himself "unearthed them" in the Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park. They have in themselves nothing to do with the special relationship that is the ostensible subject of this book and Hitchens includes them, I think, because the first, which a casual and untutored reading might construe as anti-Semitic, has a certain sensational value. It is certainly a powerful piece of verse.

But it is the high point of a book with a low, ignoble tone, sneering toward the British, condescending toward the Americans. Sometimes Hitchens forgets he is anti-elitist and slips into a snobbery, both social and intellectual, which seems to come more easily to him. He describes Walter Annenberg and Rupert Murdoch as *"arrivistes."*



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The term, disagreeable in itself, is in both cases inaccurate, though for different reasons, and its employment is characteristic of his slapdash manner.

Hitchens is capable of writing good, even stylish, prose, but here he often slips into hurried journalese. *TV Guide* is "massively circulated," a "simulacrum" is "faked," Thomas Paine fails to "choke off" the "original sin of slavery," Conrad publishes *Nostromo* when "Anglo-American hegemony" is "a safe bet," England is "the has-been country par excellence." Remarks are "breathless," officials "apparatchiks," events "exclusive." Hitchens cannot bring himself to write "so-called," it is "*soi-disant*"; a mistake is "a *bêtise*." "Gushed the *Post*" is how he begins one sentence, and it is clear he is a great reader of gossip columns, from which much of his book seems to be compiled. He jeers at Mrs. Evangeline Bruce for not being invited "to Charles and Diana's wedding."

What can be the point of this irrelevant malice? Can it be that Hitchens does not receive as many Georgetown invitations as his knowing tone would lead us to suppose? The risk of studying gossip columns is that you may end by writing like one. Thus Hitchens: "The Queen and Queen Mother became frequent visitors to Winfield House, and word was soon passed that Her Majesty felt the ambassador had been ill-used." Both Britain and the United States are ill-used in this tendentious tract, but it is of no great consequence.

# Shorter notices

*Barbara Belford* Violet: The Story of the Irrepressible Violet Hunt and Her Circle of Lovers and Friends—Ford Madox Ford, H. G. Wells, Somerset Maugham, and Henry James. Simon & Schuster, 351 pages, $22.95

Violet Hunt (1862-1942) had an affair with every man mentioned in this book's subtitle, except one. Most readers can probably guess who the exception is. Suffice it to say that Hunt's most noteworthy run-in with Henry James was that she was one of the theater critics who panned his 1895 play *Guy Domville*, the flop that finally convinced James he was no playwright. In her memoirs, Hunt described James being booed off the London stage on opening night during the curtain call: The audience's derision ringing in his ears, James walked offstage "sadly and patiently, rather like an elephant who had had a stone put into his trunk instead of a bun."

By quoting a remark like that every once in a while, Barbara Belford, a professor of journalism at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, illustrates her subject's wit, sympathy, and humor. A good thing, too, otherwise we might wonder why we were reading this account of a life spent dining out, flirting, writing sloppy melodramatic novels, trading in vicious gossip, and husband-hunting among the already married.

Violet Hunt was the daughter of a novelist and a landscape painter who were friendly with the Pre-Raphaelite artists and writers of mid-nineteenth-century England. So friendly, in fact, that Margaret Hunt offered a willing Violet to John Ruskin as a prospective wife (Violet was thirteen at the time; fifty-three-year-old Ruskin decided against). So the taste for "inappropriate men," as Belford puts it, was cultivated early. It left the well-educated, attractive, and socially daring Hunt an unmarried woman who lived at home her entire adult life, deceiving her parents about how she spent her evenings and pouring out in her diary her grief when each successive lover tired of her.

Hunt was bored by eligible bachelors her own age. Instead she became the mistress of George Boughton, an artist nearly her father's age. Next came a diplomat-turned-editor named Oswald Crawfurd (who gave her syphilis, and who liked to take her to "[prowl] Hyde Park at night, looking for the ugly prostitutes who shunned the bright lights of Picadilly"). After dalliances with H. G. Wells and Somerset Maugham she fell in love with Ford Madox Ford, né Ford Madox Hueffer.

Belford highlights the craving for respectability that co-existed with the appetites of a



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self-described "female rake." That craving was nowhere more apparent than in Hunt's insistence on calling herself Mrs. Ford Madox Hueffer, despite the fact that the weak, mendacious Hueffer never really obtained a divorce from his obstinate wife, Elsie. Elsie sued Hunt for libel over a newspaper account of the "new Mrs. Hueffer," and the scandalous publicity cost Hunt her friendship with Henry James and other members of London's artistic and political elites.

Belford draws largely on Hunt's extensive, well-preserved diaries for this biography. It is entertainingly written, with smatterings of literary and cultural detail, but suffers from a breezy journalistic certitude (e.g., "Violet overstated Wells' feelings for her . . . he never considered leaving Jane and his children"). Belford is sparing in her description of Hunt's novels, which were churned out at the rate of one a year from 1900 to 1918. The biographer makes clear that she finds the life more interesting than the works, for which Hunt's contemporaries found words like "sordid" and "flowery."

Some, however, professed to like Hunt's books. D. H. Lawrence did, although he had little use for her extravagant and possessive personality. He is quoted as saying of her, "Why, she's too devilishly clever for a man ever to want to marry." Interestingly enough, Hunt's fictional versions of herself (each of her novels had one) tended to corroborate this view. To judge from Belford's excerpts, the "ingenious ingenue" Hunt created time and time again may have been silly, but the frivolity was leavened by a sad self-knowledge.

—*Lauren Weiner*

*Oliver Taplin* Greek Fire: The Influence of Ancient Greece on the Modern World. Atheneum, 276 pages, $29.95

*Greek Fire* is a profusely illustrated survey of what recent times have made of ancient Greece. Oliver Taplin, Fellow and Tutor of Magdalen College, Oxford, and prolific writer on the Greek theater, has here expanded his scripts for an English television series (unseen by me) into an autonomous volume.

Making clear that it was only in the eighteenth century that anything like an accurate Hellenic paideia entered the modern bloodstream—the Renaissance having been a recovery of Latin culture—Dr. Taplin is entertaining on the world of Flaxman, Winckelmann, Wedgwood, and Sir William Hamilton (the first great collector of so-called "Etruscan" vases), and on the neo-Hellenic architecture that took Europe from 1790 to 1830 and throve in Washington, D.C., until 1943 (the Jefferson Memorial). Much less is heard, though, of eighteenth-century literature: Pope's Homer is dismissed as "the last glimmering of the Latinate Homer," a view ready for demolition; Goethe and Hölderlin get a sentence or so. One often, reading this book, looks back lovingly at Gilbert Highet's calmly compendious, catholically curious *Classical Tradition* (1949), which now seems a product of another age.

For Dr. Taplin hastens throughout to his contemporary exempla (he proceeds by topic —myth, sex, war, etc.). The timely theatrical adaptations of English poet Tony Harrison figure often in the book. Mr. Harrison's adaptation of a Sophoclean satyr play "combined such incongruities as ancient Greek, ghetto blasters, papyrology, lager swilling, lyre playing and clog dancing"; his *Oresteia* rang with "native Yorkshire phonemes"; his as-yet-unproduced *Lysistrata* will star (we are breathlessly told) Glenda Jackson and will be set at a nuclear missile base. Miss Jackson will be reciting the like of this: "So Lysistrata, Glenda Jackson, it's one name./Since 1945 past and present are the same." The charity that Dr. Taplin extends to these chic cacophonies he denies, by contrast, to T. S. Eliot's "long and unsuccessful attempt to accommodate Greek tragedy" in his ghetto-blasterless plays on the grounds that "his redemptive religion prevented him from facing up to horror in the Greek way." This unsavory phrasing would suggest that there are those who need not apply for admission to Dr. Taplin's New Hellenism.



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But it is politics, that Greekest of concepts, that has sadly tripped up Dr. Taplin. We hear of the inferiority of "modern democracies, communist and capitalist alike," to ancient Athens. We are to be impressed with Marx's interest in Democritus. And although some show is made of setting up a polarity between Derrida as slippery Gorgianic Sophist and Allan Bloom as an intolerant Socrates, Derrida is finally treated with sympathy and Allan Bloom declared "frightening" for offering Plato "as a champion of American Democracy." Dr. Taplin cites with respect George Steiner describing "Nürnberg Stadium marching under Hitler" as "a very Greek moment, that," and seems to give countenance to a notion that Hitler has permanently soiled Homer. He goes on to adduce Christa Wolf, "a writer in East Berlin . . . a city divided by a military wall, a city which might ignite the Third World War" (note not so much the datedness of this but its characteristic reluctance to assign blame eastward), on war as masculine. Can "we men," he whines, "change ways of thinking that are first recorded in Homer?" On this subject one may turn for answers to "the communist world, where the emancipation of women has in some respects gone further than in the West." One would like to hear Yelena Bonner on *that!*

Poor Dr. Taplin has been caught in the amber of the Cold War mentality, and the *wrong* Cold War mentality. The world changed after May 1989; his preface forlornly bears the date "February 1989." But there is something graver. One can only judge that Dr. Taplin, who comes across as a genial humanist, is very imperfectly aware of what he is tolerantly entertaining in the passages quoted above. It is nothing less than the new nihilistic orthodoxy that Western civilization, a bellicose, patriarchal, and phallocentric evil *ab ovo*, is ripe for obliteration. By being unclear about such fundamental issues and by indiscriminately welcoming much meretriciously topical Hellenizing, Dr. Taplin drops the torch. "Greek fire" at this heat looks like "Dutch courage"—an oxymoron.

—*Donald Lyons*

*Robert Bly* American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity. Harper & Row, 341 pages, $22.50

Robert Bly has culled these twenty-six essays and one interview from three decades of his poetry criticism, much of it originally published in his journal *The Fifties* (later called *The Sixties* and *The Seventies*). They are largely feisty, "calculated to draw blood from the old King"—the "old King" being "the conservative mind-set inherited from Eliot and Pound, and the triumphant flatness inherited from Descartes and Locke." To Bly, who feels that English-language poetry has been on the skids since *Beowulf*, bad verse is not merely conservative and flat but "outward," produced by "the workaday conscious mind[s]" of domesticated middle-class types (Bly draws examples from most of the celebrated American poets of this century); by contrast, good poets (such as Blake, Whitman, Yeats, most of the French symbolists and German romantics, and the Spanish-language authors Lorca, Neruda, Vallejo, Jiménez, and Machado) are "wild" and "inward," moving from image to image along "arcs of association" and plunging so far into their souls that they tap universal truths and achieve mystery, "passionate spontaneity," and "spiritual intensity."

Alas, the bits of verse that Bly singles out for approval tend to be textbook examples of raw effusion, political invective, or—most commonly—surrealistic juxtaposition. (Lorca: "One day/The horses will live in the saloons/And the outraged ants/Will throw themselves on the yellow skies that have taken refuge in the eyes of cows.") And Bly's arguments are less than convincing. He rejects the use of received forms by American poets on geographical grounds: "How can a sonnet be applied to the spaces of Montana where a single farm may include 40,000 acres?" And he attacks Eliot's theory of the objective correlative by saying that when a *real* poet is inspired to write a poem, he has "no time" to invent "formulas" for emotion but instead simply lets the words pour out of his unconscious, pure and perfect and power-



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ful. (One need only glance at Whitman's drafts of "Song of Myself" to be reminded that the first words to come to mind are rarely the best, however great the poet or strong the inspiration.) What all good poets have, Bly argues, is "revolutionary spirit": and if he approves of young poets attacking their elders—no matter what the parties stand for—he is especially partial to poems airing leftist, anti-war, or anti-American sentiments (even praising, at one point, a William Vaughn Moody poem critical of America's 1898 invasion of Cuba). Yet his iconoclasm extends beyond the political. He plays quack doctor, glibly (and unconvincingly) pigeonholing poets in one essay by type of brain structure, in another by Jungian intelligence type; and he dabbles in penny-ante mysticism, claiming that, at an Etheridge Knight reading, "I saw the applause blow right through his body, as mist blows through trees," and that sometime around 1950 "a feminine being whom I will call the Mysterious Hidden Woman began to rise from the earth."

If much of this book is inane, however, much is unexpectedly refreshing. For one thing, Bly, unlike many poets today, is not afraid to criticize his colleagues. He even takes on Williams, whom "we are supposed to regard . . . as a saint" and of whose approach to poetry he gripes that "So much depends on complicated thinking, elaborate syntax, many-layered words, non-chickens." Most admirable of all is his honesty about the current poetry scene's clubbishness, timidity, and hypocrisy. There is, he rightly insists, too much verse and too little criticism around: poets are so eager for disciples that they overencourage writing-program students with no poetic gifts, and they're so afraid of making enemies—or so given to a jejune, undiscriminating "love of poetry"—that they either don't review other poets at all or publish boring appreciations that fail "to separate the rotten grain from the sound." If one is less exasperated by this book than one might have predicted, it is because Bly's criticism, though often fatuous and perverse, shows him, at least, to be well-read, alert to the importance of the critical act, and (in his own idiosyncratic way) seriously concerned about the future of his art and the depredations of the Workshop Age. Given the poetry scene nowadays, these attributes alone put him ahead of the pack.

—*Bruce Bawer*

*William Trevor* Family Sins & Other Stories. Viking, 251 pages, $18.95

William Trevor, who has long lived in England, was born in County Cork, and all the better stories in his latest book are set in Ireland, with Irish characters, both Protestant and Catholic, rural and urban, educated and not. These stories, like most of those in his previous five collections, concern themselves largely with his homeland's tortuous relations with Britain, the exploitation of the poor by the rich or even the slightly better off, and the twisted relations within families whose members have been shaped by Ireland's historical, political, and material circumstances.

There is much to admire in Trevor's short fiction. He is a master of compact characterization, and of a unique sort of melancholy lyricism; he can also evoke any number of powerful and delicate feelings. Here is the conclusion of "Honeymoon in Tramore," in which a thirtyish bridegroom, who as a boy had been sent by his orphanage to work on a farm in Cork, has just put to bed his drunken wife, the farmer's many-suitored daughter:

> Once more he looked down into her face: for eighteen years she had seemed like a queen to him and now, miraculously, he had the right to kiss her. He straightened her slackened body, moving her arms and legs until she was lying comfortably. Slowly he pulled the bedclothes up and turned the light out; then he lay beside her and caressed her in the darkness. He had come to the farm with a label round his neck; he had come out of nowhere, from rooms and corridors that were as bleakly anonymous as the orphan home's foundling inmates. He had been known as her father's hired man, but now



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> he would be known as her husband. That was how people would refer to him, and in the end it wouldn't matter when she talked about Coddy Donnegan, or lowered her voice to mention the priest's cousin. It was natural that she should do so since she had gained less than he had from their marriage.

Paragraphs like this reveal Trevor at his best, and at his best he provides literary pleasures that few of his contemporaries can match.

But good as he is, it must be said that Trevor writes better paragraphs than stories, and that his descriptive talent is greater than his narrative. His chief weakness as a storyteller is his inability to create designs that follow naturally from character. His men and women, though touchingly introduced and memorably developed, are in the end too often sacrificed to the machinations of plot or a striving for effect: what has seemed true about them for a dozen or so pages is undone by some false twist in the final two. When Trevor's stories of Ireland work, they work for the same reasons that Sarah Orne Jewett's stories of Maine do, stories which, in their depiction of a rural population trying to wrest a living from an unforgiving landscape, are not so different from Trevor's. According to Willa Cather, in the best of Jewett "[t]he design is, indeed, so happy, so right, that it seems inevitable; the design is the story and the story is the design." The best of the stories in *Family Sins*, like those in Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, "melt into the land and the life of the land until they are not stories at all but life itself."

—*Brock Baker*

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Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication of *Old and New Poems* by Donald Hall (Ticknor & Fields, $24.95) and *Salvage Operations: New and Selcted Poems* by Paul Mariani (Norton, $17.95). Some of the poems in these collections appeared previously in *The New Criterion*.



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Notebook

# Jacques Soustelle, 1912-1990

*by Mark Falcoff*

The death of Jacques Soustelle on August 7 in a suburb of Paris at the age of seventy-eight deprived France of one of its most accomplished (and controversial) public and cultural figures. Successively an anthropologist, soldier of the Liberation, Gaullist minister of information, governor-general of Algeria, anti-Gaullist revolutionary and then hunted refugee, member of the Chamber of Deputies, and finally, one of the "immortals" of the French Academy, Soustelle's career was even more sensational and varied than that of André Malraux, with whom he shared the distinction of being both a man of letters and of action.

Born of Protestant parents in Montpellier in 1912, he received his agrégé in philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and pursued postgraduate work in anthropology with Jean Rivet at the Musée de l'homme. Like many of the French intellectuals whose coming of age coincided with Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Soustelle was drawn to the non-Communist (but essentially fellow-traveling) Left; he was active in various anti-fascist organizations, particularly the Union of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals, created in 1938, of which he was secretary-general.

A deep interest in pre-Columbian civilizations led him to Mexico in 1939, where he did much of the research for his masterly *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (1955; English translation, 1961). It was in Mexico, too, that he learned of the fall of France in 1940, rallied to de Gaulle, and became the latter's representative for Latin America. Two years later he was in London as chief of information of the general's shadow government in Carlton Gardens. In 1943, with the Free French finally established in Algeria, he became director of its joint intelligence services.

After the Liberation he held a succession of high government posts, including minister of information during de Gaulle's brief presidency, secretary-general of the Rassamblement du peuple français (RPF), and subsequently its leader in the National Assembly. In January 1955, he accepted the offer of Radical-Socialist Premier Pierre Mendès-France to act as governor-general of Algeria. His appointment—he was then known to be a "left-wing" Gaullist—was greeted with consternation by the large French settler community there, and with hope and optimism by those Algerians (and the few Algerian Frenchmen, whose number included, however, Albert Camus) who favored assimilation and union with France on the basis of equality of rights.

Soustelle's Algerian experience was the turning point of his political development: determined to apply the liberal, humanitarian values of Enlightenment France in a non-Western context, he collided with one of the central realities of the Third World —namely, that such values held out scant appeal to the native majority, and none at all to its most militant political expression, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). In-



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deed, fearful that Soustelle's reforms would slacken support for a maximalist solution, the FLN struck before those reforms could be felt: on August 20, 1955, it sponsored an attack on Philippeville and the suburbs of Constantine, in which seventy-one French settlers and residents—including women and children—and fifty-two Muslims presumed to be loyal to them were butchered under particularly atrocious circumstances.

The sight of the mutilated bodies somewhat unhinged Soustelle, and transformed him almost overnight into a hard-liner with few illusions—in other words, an ardent advocate of the cause of French Algeria, first in parliament (to which he returned in 1956), and then, again, as de Gaulle's minister of information (on the latter's second return to power two years later). When in 1960 de Gaulle finally switched sides and decided to grant the FLN what it had sought—putting an end to a war which he saw, probably rightly, was unwinnable and could only serve further to divide Frenchmen—Soustelle quit the government and broke with his chief, as he recalled, "after nineteen years, four months, and fifteen days of loyalty."

At this point Soustelle's ties with the military and the Far Right began to exceed the boundaries of civic discourse. After an unsuccessful attempt at a military coup by Algiers-based generals in April 1961, he escaped capture by the authorities and survived for several years as a fugitive—periodically turning up in Belgium, Italy, Austria, finally settling in Spain. Granted amnesty in 1968 along with General Raoul Salan, leader of the aborted putsch, he returned to France and resumed his academic career at the Ecole pratique des hautes études, and in 1973, in the National Assembly. In 1983 he succeeded to the chair of Pierre Gaxotte at the Académie Française.

In his later years Soustelle was perhaps the sharpest voice in the National Assembly questioning the smug *tier-mondiste* presumptions which for so long shaped French attitudes towards non-Western societies. But unlike many personalities of the traditionalist Right to whom he was often unfairly compared, Soustelle was a man of deep anthropological learning and cosmopolitan culture, as well as a thoroughgoing "liberal" (in the European sense). By the time of his death these qualities seemed less contradictory than during the stormy years of his active political career. In one of his last articles (*Figaro* magazine, March 24, 1990), Soustelle observed with irony that "it is paradoxical that Algeria, which gained its independence after unleashing and prosecuting a bloody war for seven years, now chooses to send us its unemployed (and its sick, who lack the treatment formerly available to it at [colonial French] hospitals free of charge)."

His skeptical view of the Third World, so long regarded as "retrograde" by the mainstream media, was acquiring an unexpected cogency. A few weeks before his death, the FLN lost its first genuinely free election in Algeria—not to the democratic Left or Right, but to Muslim fundamentalists committed to plunging the country headlong into the eleventh century. Meanwhile, French politicians were being forced to decide whether their own historic commitment to liberal values permitted—under the rubric of "multicultural" education, "antiracism," and the like—their own country's growing immigrant population from North Africa to impose in French schools their own standards, which were decidedly unliberal, starting with the veiling of women.

One of the many ways in which France so radically differs from the United States is its capacity to reintegrate talented individuals who have strayed from the boundaries of politically acceptable conduct. (Imagine someone who merely *disputed* the value of "multicultural" education being admitted to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, leave aside being awarded a tenured professorship at Harvard or Yale!) For all its well-known shortcomings, France also possesses an enviable capacity to place culture above and apart from politics. The long and productive career of Jacques Soustelle suggests some of the benefits that can be derived from both.



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# Letters

## Sidney Keyes

To the Editors:
In his otherwise sympathetic and perceptive review of Sidney Keyes's poems ("Ruined Squire," March 1990), Robert Richman writes that Keyes "looked like a corpse" and "was unable to love anyone." Both assertions are untrue. He was physically by no means unattractive, and during his brief life deeply loved both Milein Cosmann and, after her, Renée-Jane Scott. No cold fish he.

Michael Meyer
London, England

## Walter Benjamin

To the Editors:
In the opening paragraph of "The Beatification of Walter Benjamin" (June 1990), Richard Vine characterizes Benjamin as follows:

> Professionally, the would-be philosopher was a failure. Personally, his life was ruled, if not by duplicity, then by abulia . . . [and] unable to master the world outside himself, he ended as its self-selected victim, killing himself at the age of forty-eight out of accumulated self-pity.

Mr. Vine chooses to begin his reevaluation of Benjamin with a base personal attack and does not stray from this mode of discourse throughout. It appears that in taking this approach to an ostensibly intellectual inquiry, Mr. Vine experiences a perverse pleasure that would be denied him were he actually to deal with the work and ideas of Walter Benjamin. The ideas of Benjamin here are secondary.

It is not until the end of Vine's condemnation of Benjamin to the purgatory reserved for all defunct "leftist ideologues" that the primary objective of his invective becomes evident. The key question for Vine is revealed as being the determination of "who benefits from Walter Benjamin's beatification, and what precisely do they stand to gain?" Mr. Vine then chants a litany of the evils of which "career academics," "trash-infatuated artists," and "new-wave curators" are guilty. The "real winners," however, are "a cartel of leftist ideologues who reap increasing power through the systematic debasement of art." Leaving aside the jingoistic images of Colombian drug lords and oil-hoarding Arabs that his language conjures up, Mr. Vine stresses that "[t]hese champions of liberation" are the real enemy of what he considers most sacred within the realm of "Western cultural achievement," from the "free economic and artistic markets" to what constitutes "works of high purpose and high accomplishment," which is generally consistent with the avowed mission of *The New Criterion*—namely, against Marxism in literature and for modernism in art.

T. S. Eliot ("The Function of Criticism," 1923) wrote:

> The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavor to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks—tares to which we are all subject—and compose his differences with as many of his



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> fellows and possible, in the common pursuit of true judgment. When we find that quite the contrary prevails, we begin to suspect that the critic owes his livelihood to the violence and extremity of his opposition to other critics, or else to some trifling oddities of his own with which he contrives to season the opinions which men already hold, and which out of vanity or sloth they prefer to maintain. We are tempted to expel the lot.

The beatification of Thomas Stearns Eliot, who has long been declared to be among the blessed in heaven and consequently entitled to public worship, and his further canonization are, of course, a well-established fact. One needs only to peruse *The New Criterion* collection to confirm it. It would be tragic, therefore, to find the critics who write for the magazine founded and named in his honor to be among "the lot" that St. Eliot would be tempted to expel. Because neither in the way that Mr. Vine deals with Benjamin's ideas and his literary and philosophical achievements nor in his defense of art does he exhibit any of the characteristics that Eliot seems to demand of the critic. With respect to the latter, it seems that both Mr. Vine and *The New Criterion* are intent on establishing modernism in art as the canon by which all other art is to be judged, as if to place modern art in a shrine and solemnly declare its sanctity were in effect to exalt it. To continually refuse to see in any new, "post-modern" (as much as this term appears to irritate the editors of *The New Criterion*) art forms anything of merit worth examining in the pages of the magazine cannot be said to be, as Eliot would have it, in "the common pursuit of true judgment."

As to the concept of Marxism in literature, Benjamin's ideas on this as well as his philosophical and literary contributions, Mr. Vine simply does not deal with. Instead, he is quick to fault Benjamin as much for the Marxist rhetoric abundant in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" as for the insufficient Marxist content of "The Paris of the Second Empire in the Works of Baudelaire." Displaying an absolute disregard for Benjamin's work, it becomes clear that the careful reader who wishes to understand this complex and important figure in the literature of ideas must look elsewhere than Mr. Vine's smear piece.

Among his many sins, Mr. Vine is guilty of what Susan Sontag has cautioned against in any evaluation of an artist's work: "One cannot use the life to interpret the work. But one can use the work to interpret the life." Mr. Vine's assertion that Benjamin was a failure as a human being is a vitriolic personal attack that, if accepted, would allow Benjamin entry into that pantheon of human failures that includes Kafka, Proust, and Baudelaire—all of whom have been similarly accused of a fatal moral weakness. What Benjamin once observed brilliantly of Kafka can also be said of him: "To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure."

Cultural history has demonstrated that the vision of "failures" like Benjamin has gone much farther in advancing artistic achievement and sensibility than the work of newer critics like Mr. Vine, and the editors of *The New Criterion* would be well advised to inspect their ranks for barbarians who may have already passed through the gates.

Walt Jimenez
Ph.D. Candidate
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, NJ

*Richard Vine replies:*

Certainly a failed life may yield exquisite poetry, though one wishes our academics would occasionally mention that a moral and happy one can do likewise. Were the sole question whether or not Walter Benjamin communicates a refined aesthetic sensibility in arresting and euphonious language, Mr. Jimenez and I would have no argument. A lyrical essayist Benjamin indisputably is. This does not mean that he—or any aesthete—necessarily qualifies as a producer of significant social theory, or even of literature. To my mind, Benjamin's work is grievously forced—tricked out with the temperament and mannerisms of imagined genius when it ought to be concentrated upon some aspect of common truth which the author is uniquely suited to express. A man who writes "The whore represents the completed will to culture" is all too obviously faking.

Besides, it is primarily as a thinker that Ben-



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jamin is now widely touted, and as such he fails on every conceivable count. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" immodestly advocates for the whole of technologically developed society a spiritually destitute way of life based on an innately repugnant (and today almost universally repudiated) political philosophy predicated on a willfully inaccurate history informed by an amateurish critical doctrine—the whole of it illogically and inconsistently argued. This entire house-that-Jack-built sequence springs, of course, from a fundamental misunderstanding of—and disdain for—human nature in general and the industrialized working class in particular.

Benjamin's defenders have made of him an icon beyond the ken of everyday comprehension. Like Freud or Nietzsche or Foucault, he captivates academics by the sheer enchantment of mythopoeic power. They, who should know better (who are paid to know and teach better), refuse to apply to him even the simplest tests of validity—tests that they would unhesitatingly apply to a freshman theme, or to a treatise by Adam Smith. The use of an ad hominem tactic in a portion of my article was perhaps overzealous but quite literal in intent: an effort to penetrate, well, the aura and get to the man.

There is serious sociopolitical menace in Benjamin's thinking the moment it departs from the strictly meditative and personal. The more seductive and fluent a writer, the more we are compelled to ask if his character in any way reflects or determines his errors. Benjamin is a man who does not scruple to depict, to prescribe for, to speak at and about people like myself, my family, and my childhood friends. He characterizes us as "the masses"—a kind of viscous social effluvium immune to (when not intimidated by) aesthetic distinction, and forever seeking the lowest possible cultural level. I see no reason why we, in turn, should not judge him. My piece, indeed, does Benjamin the honor of accepting some of his own terms and principles. It looks to the materially and socially privileged circumstances of his offensive production.

Anyone who thinks that Susan Sontag lives by her own work/life dictum should examine her hagiographic piece on Benjamin, "The Last Intellectual."

For the rest, I hope—most especially for the sake of "the masses"—that neither I nor the editors of *The New Criterion* will ever back down from championing the Western cultural achievement (no scare quotes required) or such genuinely complex and distinguished examplars as T.S. Eliot.

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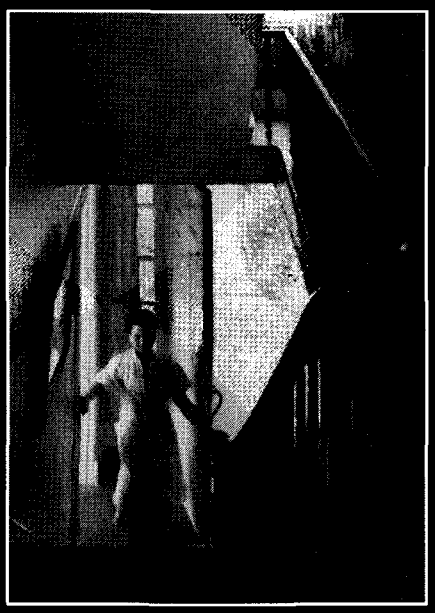

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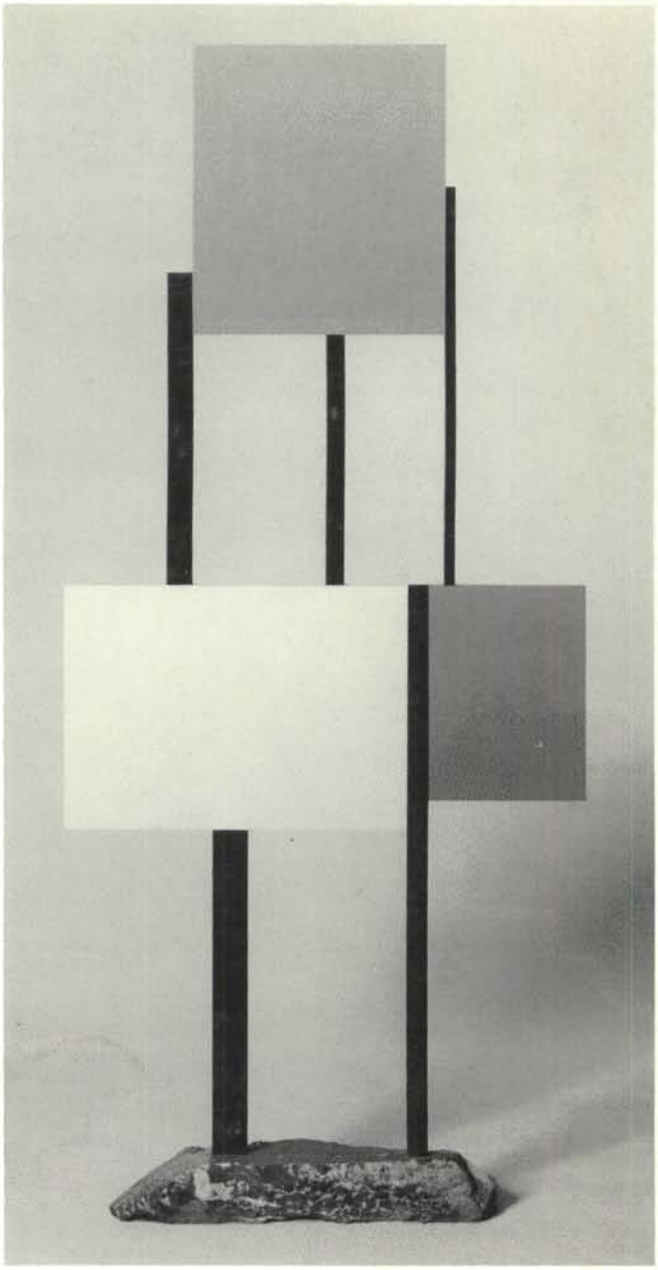

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